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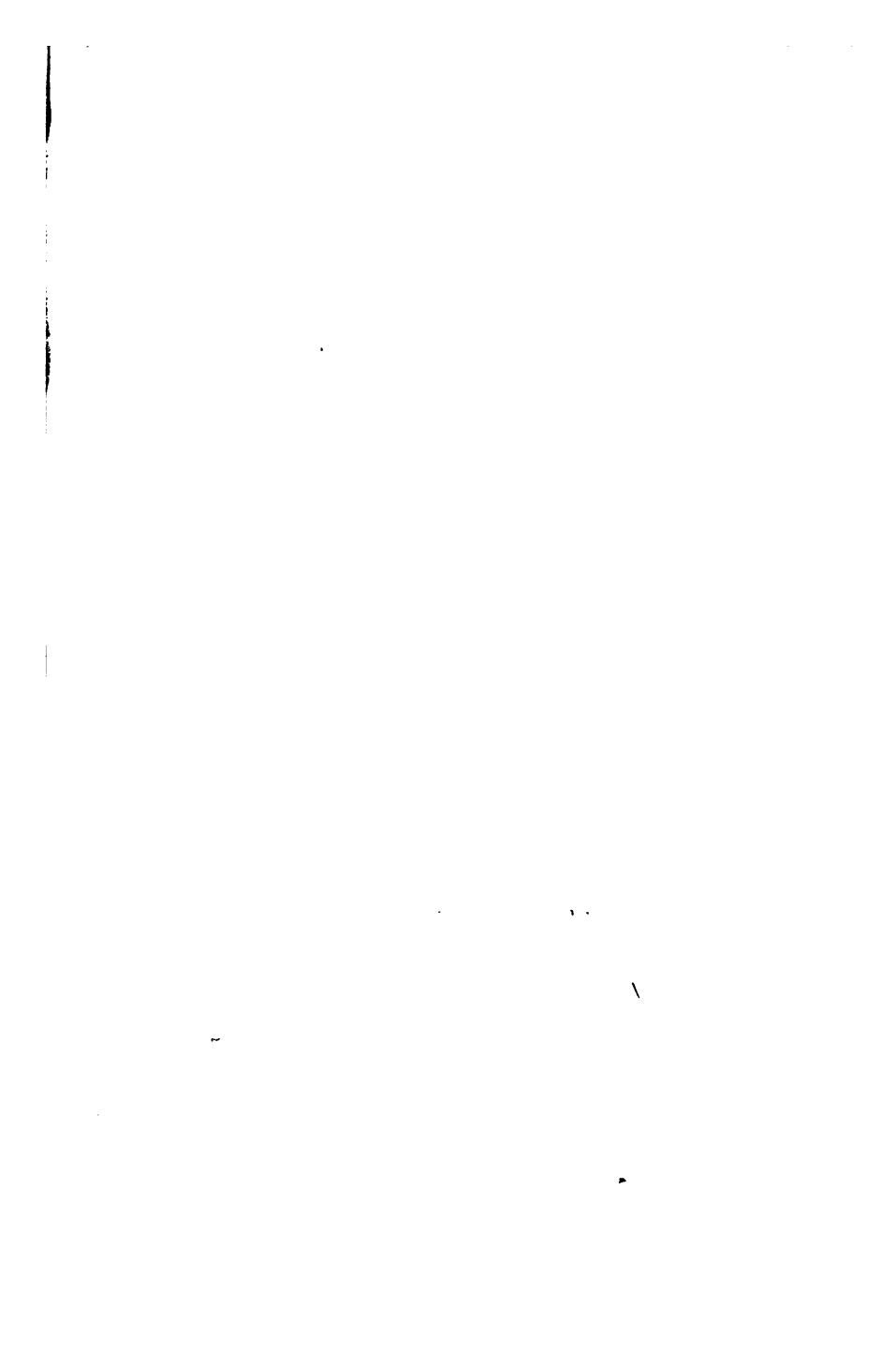
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THE LAST INVASION



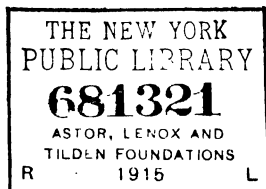
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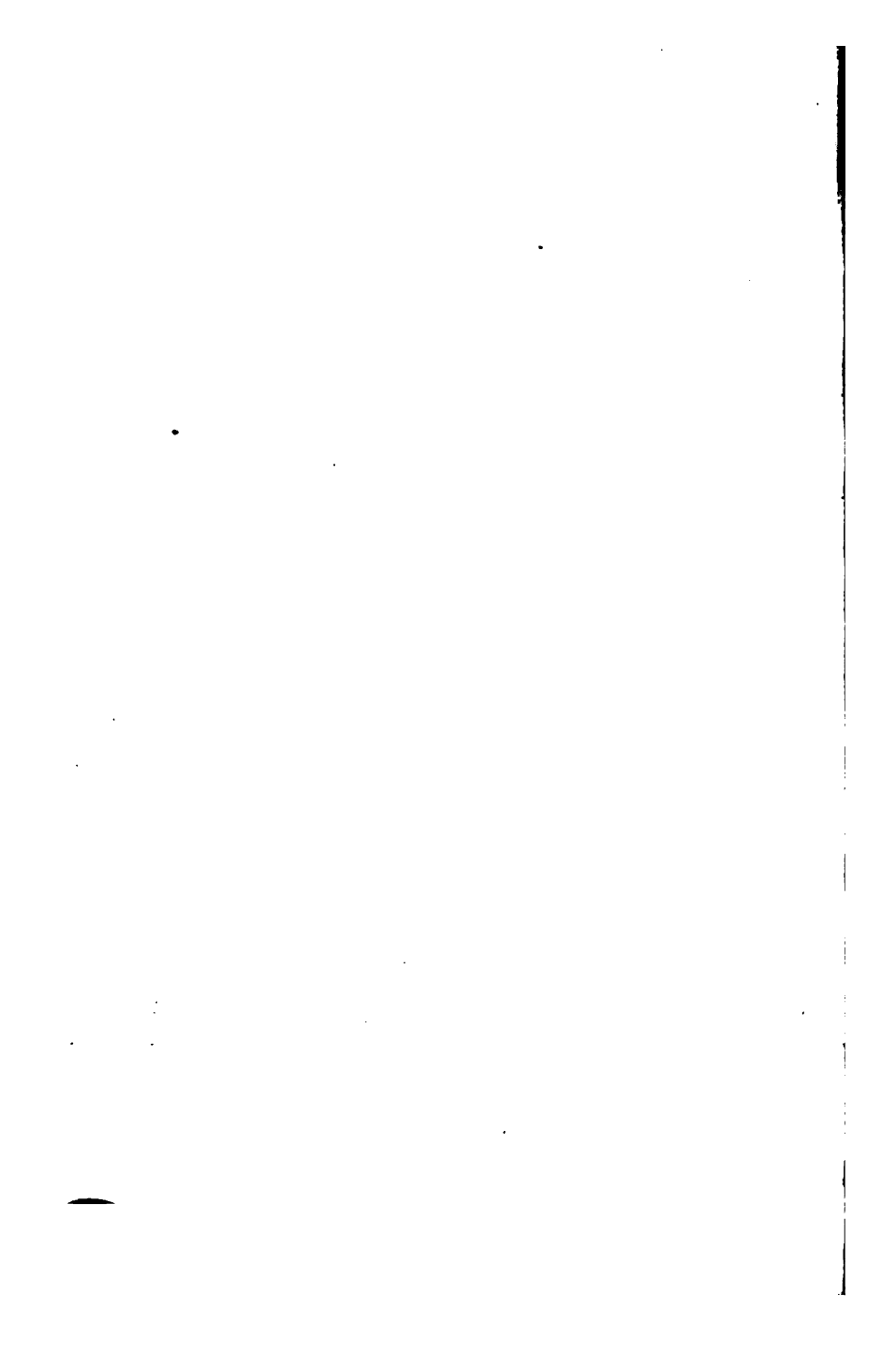
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PUBLISHED SEPTEMBER, 1914
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ILLUSTRATIONS

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HOY WAN
ALLEN
MARSH

THE LAST INVASION



THE LAST INVASION

CHAPTER I

TOM BLAKESLEY could not have said what it was that impelled him to go out on the porch after supper. The evening paper had been brought in; there were no newsboys crying extra editions; there was, indeed nothing outside but a howling November wind which was driving the leaves in scurrying eddies and whipping the bare branches of the trees.

The first swish of the wind almost jerked the door-knob from Tom's fingers. He closed the door quickly behind him, then stood watching the queer light-and-shadow effects caused by the wide swinging of the arc-light at the corner. At one instant the Blakesleys' horse-block and hitching-post were hidden in darkness, the next they stood out sharply in a brilliant patch of clear light.

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Shivering a little in the wind, Tom stood and watched, counting the changes. As he turned to go back into the house he glanced over his shoulder. The light had swung his way again, and the horse-block and hitching-post were not alone. Right in front of them, clearly outlined, was a man on horseback. Tom had just time to notice that the horse stood with hanging head, and that the rider wore a queer head-gear, when the shadowy picture disappeared in blackness.

It took Tom very few seconds to get from the windy porch to the warm sitting-room, where his father and mother sat on opposite sides of the big table.

"There's a funny-looking man sitting on a horse in front of the house," he announced.

His father glanced up casually from his paper.

"That so?" he asked, carelessly.

Mrs. Blakesley laid down her sewing.

"You don't suppose—" she began.

Her husband interrupted her with a laugh.

"My dear," he said, "you're bound that the enemy is going to burn the house over our heads. Can't I make you understand that we're as thoroughly out of it here as though this war were being fought in Africa?"

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Tom had gone to the parlor windows, flattened his face against the pane, and was looking out. After a bit he made out the horse, standing with hanging head. Of the rider he could see nothing. Then, as his eyes grew more accustomed to the darkness, he saw quite clearly the figure of a man very cautiously mounting the front steps.

He jumped back from the window, too startled to speak. His father and mother knew instantly that something was wrong. Before they could more than get from their chairs there was a sharp knock at the front door. Mr. Blakesley went into the hall and opened it. Before he had a chance to close it again, or even to speak, the figure of a man had darted through the door and closed it quickly behind him.

Tom did not have a chance to feel frightened. He stood staring with wide eyes at the strange figure. He did not have to ask what the man was. Every detail was familiar enough; he had seen them again and again in the newspapers and magazines. There, sure enough, was the uniform of bluish gray, the trousers tucked into black boots, the jacket touched here and there with yellow braid.

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And on the man's head was the cap with the narrow leather vizor and the peaked top.

"I want something to eat," the man said, shortly. He spoke good enough English, but there was about his words a difference, somehow, that showed that his tongue was used to uttering a different speech.

Tom and his parents stood staring at the man without speaking, almost unconsciously taking in the details of his appearance. He was a short, dark man, giving the suggestion of strength without displaying any particular breadth of shoulder. He had a black mustache, and his face was covered by several days' growth of beard. He looked drawn and very tired.

"Come!" he said, sharply, as all three of them stood staring at him. "I'm hungry. There's nothing to be afraid of."

Mr. Blakesley nodded to his wife, and she walked into the dining-room. The strange soldier stood leaning against the wall. His carbine was slung across his shoulder; he did not offer to touch it, nor did his fingers move toward the automatic pistol that hung at his side.

"Just you three in the house?" he asked.

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"The servants," answered Tom's father.

"Don't anybody go out, and don't go near the telephone. That's all I ask," the soldier said.

Mrs. Blakesley came back with bread and cold meat and a cup of coffee. The strange cavalryman ate where he stood, fairly gobbling the food. When he had finished he handed the empty dishes to Tom and smiled.

"Thanks," he said. "I was pretty well gone. You can use your 'phone now. It won't make much difference. I shall probably be caught anyhow."

He was out of the door and down the steps like a flash. They heard his saber clank against one of the steps and saw him get stiffly into the saddle. His horse's feet clattered on the asphalt pavement.

"George," Mrs. Blakesley said, quickly, "hurry and telephone somebody!"

Tom's father stood rubbing his hand across his forehead and staring out through the glass of the front door. When he looked around Tom was rather frightened. He had never seen such a look on his father's face.

"Are we awake?" he asked. "Why, tonight's paper said that there wasn't a single

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hostile soldier a hundred miles west of the Atlantic coast—and that there wouldn't be."

"Won't you please go to the telephone, George?" repeated Mrs. Blakesley.

"There's no use doing that," Tom's father answered. "I don't know where to telephone. You can't tell such things to the police. And, as he said, he'll probably be caught anyhow. I can't understand how he got into the city. And on horseback, too!"

Tom found his tongue for the first time.

"He didn't shoot, did he?" he demanded. "I thought soldiers always shot when they went into hostile towns."

Mr. Blakesley shook his head. "Not these days, son," he said. "That man was just a scout. He's come on ahead to find out how many of our soldiers there are here in the city. Probably he isn't alone."

They had gone back into the sitting-room by this time, and Mr. and Mrs. Blakesley had sat down again on opposite sides of the table. Tom wondered why he wasn't more frightened. He only felt excited, as though he were at a football game or had just seen the fire-engines go past the house.

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"What are we going to do, George?" he heard his mother ask.

"Do?" repeated Mr. Blakesley. "I'm sure I don't know. This business is beyond me. I hadn't the slightest idea we'd ever be involved. I can't even believe now that this is anything serious. It is probably just a scouting party that's been separated from their main force. We may not see another of their soldiers during the war."

"There won't be battles here in Pittsfield, will there, father?" Tom inquired.

"Oh no—" began Mr. Blakesley.

Just at that instant there came a great clatter of hoofs from the street outside. Tom was at the window in an instant, in time to see galloping horses and the familiar brown uniforms of American soldiers flash past in the flickering light.

"Oh," he cried, "they're after the scout!"

Mr. Blakesley turned from the window.

"Guess you'd better go to bed, son," he suggested.

Tom was too thoroughly excited by this time to resent having to go up-stairs so early. He went to his room and stood looking out the window. Down-stairs he could hear his

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father and mother talking steadily, and he thought that his mother was crying.

All the stories he had ever read of war and battles went galloping through his mind. Of course, he had known what war was, but he hadn't quite realized that it ever affected people like his father and mother and himself. He had been greatly excited during the three months which had passed since the breaking out of the war. But it had all gone on a great ways off, like all the other wars which had happened during Tom's life. He had read the papers and gone to the station when troops were passing through the city, and it had all seemed very fine and splendid—like a parade that was going on every day instead of just on the days when there was a circus in town.

Then one day Tom's father had come home from the office looking very sober and had showed them a newspaper with very large, black head-lines. Tom had listened to the story of the American naval defeat with a sinking heart. He had been very glad that it was not altogether the fault of the American ships and sailors. They had not been out-fought, but a great storm had scattered the

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fleet, and the enemy had struck before the ships could be reunited.

Even then nobody had been really frightened. Tom remembered that his father and other men had laughed at the idea that the country might actually suffer invasion. They had talked about business depression—and Tom knew that they weren't having quite as many different things to eat and that his father had told him to be a little careful of his new winter clothes. But that had been all.

And now Tom could not get his thoughts away from the blue-clad figure he had seen standing in his own front hall. It was as though things about which he had always dreamed had suddenly taken to happening in real life. He could not quite believe that he was awake.

And yet, even as he stood there at the window, there came another clatter of hoofs, and another knot of brown cavalymen appeared. This time, instead of passing quickly out of sight, they got off their horses, unslung their carbines, and disappeared into back yards and into the deep shadows between houses. It was too much for Tom. He was out his door and hurrying down-stairs.

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"Father," he called, "they're hunting for that scout right in the Briscombes' back yard!"

For the second time that night there came a knock at the door. Mr. Blakesley opened it to a young American officer.

"Sorry to knock you up at this time of night," the soldier began, "but somebody's been telephoning to the police and everybody else that they've seen a strange cavalryman in this part of town."

"We saw him! We saw him!" Tom exclaimed. "He was here."

The officer started and turned questioningly to Tom's father.

"It's quite true," Mr. Blakesley said. "We did see him."

And he went on to describe the strange cavalryman's appearance. The officer did not speak, but struck his leg sharply with his hand and hurried down the steps. Mr. Blakesley put on the night-latch and turned out the hall light.

"We'll all go to bed," he said. "And I guess you needn't go to school in the morning, Tom."

CHAPTER II

TOM could not be certain how many of the things that went on during the night were his dreams and how many of them actually happened. He was quite sure that he heard more horses, men's voices, and the sound of people running. Once he saw lights and heard his father moving about. Another time he thought he heard shooting.

He was up very early in the morning and at his window. The street looked perfectly natural. Nothing had changed. There was nobody in sight save a milkman with his wire basket of bottles, and Tom began to think that he had dreamed the whole thing.

The appearance of his father and mother at the breakfast-table, however, told him clearly enough that the events of the night had been perfectly real. His mother's eyes were very red, and his father looked just as he had when he closed the front door the night before.

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"Tom," Mr. Blakesley began, as soon as his son came into the room, "you and a great many boys of your age have got to turn into men overnight. Do you think you can do it?"

"Yes, sir," Tom answered, promptly.

"It may be," his father went on, "that we could all stay through the winter in Pittsfield without any danger. War is a very uncertain thing. But your mother is nervous, and there is no use in running any unnecessary risks. I'm going to begin treating you as a man right away. I'm going to tell you just what you saw last night really meant."

Partly in his own words, partly in extracts from the morning paper, Mr. Blakesley made his explanation. The enemy had struck a totally unexpected blow. Instead of striking straight at one of the great Atlantic seaports, as every one had expected, they had landed two armies, one in Texas, another on the coast of Maine. Both landings had been accomplished with remarkable speed and had been effected at points where the Americans had no immediate forces to resist invasion. Just how large the hostile armies were was unknown; it was only known that they were both considerable forces.

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"Now don't let all this frighten you, Tom," Mr. Blakesley advised. "We're going to beat them finally just as sure as the sun shines. We can beat any army that attempts to invade our country. It's too big a job for any army in the world. But they're better trained for war than we are, and they've taken us by surprise. For a little while they're going to have the best of it, and this country is going to see things that it hasn't seen for half a century. And young fellows like you, as I said, are going to grow up in a hurry."

The enemy's objectives, Mr. Blakesley explained, could only be guessed. It was hardly possible that either of the two invading armies would attempt to get far inland. It would be too difficult to feed them. It seemed probable that they would strike at some of the great seaports from the rear, thus avoiding the necessity of battering down the great sea forts.

"Here in Pittsfield," Mr. Blakesley said, "we thought we were out of the beaten path. It didn't seem that there was any reason for the northern army to strike this way. But last night not fewer than five of the enemy's scouts entered the city, and four of them es-

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caped. How much they learned is not known. Neither is it known how much of a force is immediately behind them. Telegraph and telephone lines have been cut right and left. Central New York has been chopped into a number of pieces which have no means of quick communication between them. Our soldiers are being gathered as rapidly as possible, but it's like a game of blind man's buff. We know the enemy is here, but we don't know just where.

"Pittsfield is an important railroad town. It is quite possible that the enemy will try to seize it, and we won't let it go without a fight. So there may be an actual battle, within a few miles of the city, inside a week.

"Right now I can't leave the city. I've got to be at the office every day. But you and Jack Ranney have got to see to it that your mothers get out of town. You're to go to Grandfather Blakesley's, at Bradley, and stay there until Pittsfield is out of danger. Are you man enough to shoulder that job?"

"I guess Jack and I can do it," Tom promised.

Half an hour after breakfast Jack Ranney appeared at the house, and Mrs. Ranney and

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Tom's mother were busy telephoning each other every five minutes.

"Have everything packed by noon," Mr. Blakesley said, as he got into his overcoat and prepared to leave for the office. "You can get away on the one-o'clock train, and it 'll be better to go then, in case there's a rush later."

The two boys were altogether too busy during the morning to have much time for talk. There were errands to be run, trunks to be packed, a hundred things to be done.

Tom was surprised at the appearance of the streets. The lone milkman whom he had seen from his window early in the morning had led him to expect that everything would be exactly as it had been the night before. He found that exactly the opposite was the case. The streets were literally full of people, yet many stores which were always open at this time were closed. Newsboys were scampering about everywhere with bundles of papers under their arms, and everybody seemed to be buying and reading them.

In front of a bank building there was a great crowd of excited people. Tom thought at first that there had been an accident or a

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fire, but when he came close he saw that all the people were simply trying to get through the narrow doors of the bank, which had just been opened. He saw one man sitting on the curbstone with his head in his hands.

He was glad to get out of the down-town district and get home. There was something about the crowds and the excitement different from anything he had ever known before. He had been excited often enough in his life, but never in just this way. Always before he had felt rather shaky and trembly, but it had been pleasurable. Now there was no fun in it at all. He was beginning to be frightened.

"Here," he told himself, sharply, "I mustn't get scared. I'm not a baby. If father thinks I'm going to be a man I've got to begin."

His way took him within a few blocks of one of the railroad-stations, and here for the first time he saw troops in considerable numbers. Just as he was starting to cross a street the head of a column of brown infantry whipped round a corner and blocked his way. Tom stopped to watch. Rank after rank the brown figures tramped past,

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each man carrying rifle, bayonet, haversack, a belt full of cartridges, and half of one of the little shelter tents slung from shoulder to hip in a brown roll.

It seemed to Tom that he must be watching a whole army. Before many weeks had passed he was going to be able to estimate the numbers of large bodies of troops. Now he could not. He would have been greatly astonished to learn that he had only witnessed the passing of a single regiment.

As he hurried home he caught fleeting glimpses down cross-streets of other bodies of men. Once a hollow rumbling made him turn his head, and he saw a battery of field artillery. Again he passed a great train of covered wagons, each of them painted gray and drawn by four mules.

When he was a block from the house he saw that his own family and the Ranneys were grouped on the steps staring down the street, and he heard Jack Ranney call out:

"There comes Tom!"

"Where have you been all this time?" his mother asked him; and then, before he had time to answer: "Where is your father? Have you been to the office?"

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"No," replied Tom, trying to answer all the questions at once.

"I can't see where he can be," cried Mrs. Blakesley. "It's nearly half past twelve, and our train goes at one. I'm sure something must have happened to him."

Tom and Jack were sent up-stairs to carry down the trunks.

"What's it like down-town?" Jack asked, eagerly, as they puffed down the stairs under their burden.

"Soldiers everywhere," answered Tom.

"Gee!" exclaimed Jack. "I think it's great, don't you?"

"Yes," answered Tom; but at the bottom of his heart he was not sure. The memory of the crowded streets he had been through, and of the old man sitting on the curbstone with his head in his hands, was not pleasant.

As the two boys reached the porch with the trunk Mr. Blakesley had just turned up the walk from the street, and Tom's mother was hurrying toward him.

"There, there!" Mr. Blakesley called out, encouragingly. "It's all right. I'm not hurt."

He came up onto the steps, with Tom's

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mother clinging anxiously to his arm, and stood there wiping his perspiring face with his handkerchief. His collar had been torn from its button, his necktie hung over his vest, and his clothes and hat were covered with dust and dirt.

"What has happened?" Mrs. Ranney and Tom's mother were demanding in the same breath.

"Let me get my breath," answered Mr. Blakesley, "and I'll tell you. Might as well take that trunk back into the house, boys. You won't want it."

When they were all seated at the dining-table (although nobody seemed to want anything to eat) Mr. Blakesley told them what had happened.

"I think all Pittsfield has lost its mind," he began. "Everybody is trying to get out of town at once. I went straight from the office to the B. & W. station. Couldn't get within two blocks of it. You never saw such a crowd. Then I tried the H. & A. It's a long way around to Bradley that way, but I tried to get what I could. There was a worse crowd there, and a man told me that they'd abandoned the regular schedule and that the

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whole line would carry nothing but troops and supplies for days."

"Then you didn't get the tickets?" Mrs. Ranney asked.

"Tickets!" echoed Mr. Blakesley. "I didn't even see the outside of the stations."

"Then we'll have to stay in Pittsfield!" Tom's mother gasped.

"Well," answered his father, "that depends on the boys."

Tom and Jack looked up eagerly.

"There's no getting out of town by rail," Mr. Blakesley continued, "and it doesn't look as though there would be for several days. Mary, would you and Mrs. Ranney trust yourselves to Tom and Jack and make the trip by auto?"

CHAPTER III

THE two women stared at him in astonishment.

"Sure!" Jack put in, eagerly. "That would be easy."

"Of course, if there were any real danger I wouldn't suggest it," declared Mr. Blakesley. "It just means that Jack will have to drive you a hundred and twenty-five miles, and do it as quickly as he can. The roads may be crowded, but they'll be perfectly safe. If you can start within two hours you can be in Hastings by seven o'clock. There's a good hotel there. It ought to be easy enough to drive from there to Bradley to-morrow. Do you know the road, Jack?"

"I've been over it once," Jack answered.

There followed a few minutes of lively discussion, during which Jack and Tom fairly held their breath, and ten minutes later Mr. Ranney's burly figure was climbing out of

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the big touring-car in front of the Blakesley house.

Tom overheard a few words of conversation between the two men that were not intended for his ears.

"You really think this move's necessary, Blakesley?" Mr. Ranney asked. "It seems like taking chances to intrust our wives to a couple of boys."

"If you'd been at the station," Tom's father answered, "you wouldn't ask."

"How about letting them stay here?"

Mr. Blakesley shook his head.

"They aren't badly frightened yet," he pointed out. "Pittsfield is going to be worse every day. In a week it 'll be no place for a woman."

Tom went about his work with a new feeling after this. The fear which had been growing steadily within him and which had made him thoroughly ashamed of himself disappeared instantly. For the first time in his fifteen years of life a really great responsibility had fallen upon him. It was the fact that he was unconsciously ready to bear it that made him forget his fear and think of nothing but the duty which had suddenly been imposed upon him.

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The abruptness with which everything had happened and the feverish air which a few hours had seemed to produce in the entire city had keyed everybody up to a pitch of nervous tension which affected all of them strangely. Had they been called upon, long before the required moment, to prepare to flee from Pittsfield in the Ranneys' car they would have been appalled at the mere thought. But with the necessity for immediate action pressing them they went about their preparations as though such trips were matters of daily occurrence.

Shortly before half past two in the afternoon Mrs. Ranney and Mrs. Blakesley took their places in the back seat of the car, while hand-bags, suit-cases, and bundles were piled in after them. The two boys climbed into the front seat, and the self-starting mechanism began to thud and whirl under the long hood.

"Now remember," Mr. Blakesley cautioned them, as the engine began to sputter, "this is probably the worst of it, and we'll all be eating Sunday dinner back here as though nothing had happened. I'll write every day, and if it's possible I'll 'phone or wire. Remember who you are now, Tom!"

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Mr. Ranney added a word as Jack threw in the clutch.

"If you have to go the last few miles on four flat tires, why, do it," he said to his son. "New wheels won't ruin me, and I want to know that all four of you are in Bradley to-morrow night."

Another minute and they were out in the street and spinning north. Tom turned in his seat and waved his hand to the two bare-headed men standing by the curb.

"Which way are you going?" he asked Jack.

"Straight out Fourth Avenue," Jack answered. "There are a lot of hills between here and Hastings, but the road's good all the way, and this car eats hills."

"I don't suppose we'll have any trouble, do you?" Tom wondered.

"Don't suppose we'll see a thing," Jack replied, in a rather disappointed tone. "I think it's all a big scare."

Tom thought of the events of the preceding night (all of which details he had told Jack already). He knew that it would take something more than a scare to produce all that he had seen and heard.

Even in the residence section of town they

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found the streets fairly jammed with vehicles and crowds of people on foot, and Jack was forced to drive slowly. They saw many carriages and autos which seemed bound on journeys like their own, for they were full of baggage.

Not until they came to the edge of town, however, did they encounter anything more serious than crowds. As they came into the outskirts of Pittsfield, however, the tangle of traffic grew denser, and finally they began to meet streams of vehicles going in the other direction.

"You'll have to go some other way!" a man on a motor-cycle called out to them as he whizzed past.

"Gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Blakesley. "Suppose we can't get out of the city!"

Jack turned into a cross-street, for the jam of traffic in Fourth Avenue was so dense that there was no use attempting to push through it.

"You wait here," Tom said, as he got out of the car, "and I'll go ahead a bit and see what's the matter."

It was a little easier to make his way in the broader street on foot, but slow work even at

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that. He accosted several people, but no one seemed to know what had caused the blockade of the street. Finally he caught sight of a policeman's helmet and elbowed his way to the blue-clad figure.

"Can't we get out Fourth Avenue?" he asked, breathlessly.

The policeman shook his head.

"Troops are coming in that way," he explained, "and the road's got to be kept clear of ordinary traffic."

Even as Tom made his way back to the waiting machine he heard the shrilling of a bugle and caught sight of the first of the incoming troops. They did not look like the men he had seen near the railroad-station in the morning. They looked tired and dirty, and the dust and dirt of their long march were thick upon them.

Jack threaded his way swiftly through side-streets, drove through the factory district with little regard for the speed regulation, and finally brought them past the last straggling houses and out into the open country.

"If the soldiers are coming in Fourth Avenue," Tom said, "why aren't they coming by rail?"

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"Don't ask me," answered Jack.

"And then," Tom went on, "if they're coming both by rail and by road it must mean that the country between here and Hastings is full of 'em."

"What of that?"

"Just this," Tom explained. "If Hastings is full of troops there won't be any place for us there to-night."

Jack's only answer to this was to increase the big car's speed. They were by this time well out into the country, and seemed to have chosen a road neglected by most of the fugitives from the city. The road was fairly deserted. But far to the right of them, great clouds of dust in the air told their story plainly enough. Whether the dust was caused by the increasing exodus from the city or by bodies of troops in motion the boys could not be sure.

They began to have a dim idea of the huge nature of military manœuvres. They had always imagined that battles suddenly took place between bodies of troops that found themselves face to face with each other. Yet here was a great part of the country completely thrown out of gear, the ordinary proc-

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esses of daily life completely stopped — and this only by the preparations for battle. The fight itself might not occur for days, might not take place within fifty miles of Pittsfield.

"Say," Tom spoke, suddenly, "is there anything the matter with your engine?"

"No," answered Jack. "Why?"

"It seems to me I've heard two motors for a minute or more," Tom explained.

They were driving through a wide tract known as Dry Prairie. There were no intervening woods or hills to cut off another road from sight. Yet now both boys could distinctly hear the explosions of another gasoline-engine. They looked this way and that. Not an automobile or motor-cycle was to be seen.

"Some farmer's using a gasoline-engine," Tom suggested.

Jack shook his head.

"They use single-cylinder engines," he said, "and they don't make that sort of a racket."

Tom suddenly gripped his arm and pointed.

"Look there!" he cried.

High above their heads and some distance ahead of them a huge white shape was whirling through the air, wheeling above the sur-



"LOOK THERE!" HE CRIED. HIGH ABOVE THEIR HEADS AND SOME DISTANCE
AHEAD OF THEM A HUGE WHITE SHAPE WAS WHIRLING THROUGH THE AIR

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face of the country in great circles like a hunting hawk.

"It's an army aeroplane!" Jack exclaimed.

"And that means the enemy must be closer to us than we had any idea," added Tom.

"They wouldn't be using an aeroplane if they didn't have to find things out in a hurry."

Mrs. Ranney leaned forward from the rear seat.

"Are we nearly at Hastings, Jack?" she asked.

Jack had to confess that he was not quite sure. They had been following a series of little-used roads and had come a good ways out of the most direct road. The speedometer showed that they had traveled some twenty miles from the city. Hastings should be not more than ten miles away, and the boys were sure that it was some distance to the right of their present course. It was after four o'clock, and none of them had any desire to continue the trip in darkness.

At once they began bearing to the right, and the distant aeroplane, whose engine was still faintly audible, seemed to be following the same general course.

They had not driven more than three or

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four miles before it became apparent that the country about Hastings—usually a quiet, sleepy district—had become suddenly populous. They did not see anything at once; but they became aware of a dim, confused sound, audible even above the noise of their own progress. Then they began to see moving shapes on the roads in every direction, here a long train of wagons, there a mass of infantry. The car dropped down into a wooded hollow, climbed a hill, and came out at a cross-roads. The road running at right angles to the one they had been following was choked from fence to fence by a solid column of moving troops.

Jack stopped the car.

"The country's literally full of soldiers," he said, "and the closer we get to Hastings the worse it seems to be."

The good-natured infantrymen let them through a gap in the column, but they seemed to be coming from bad to worse. Every road was full, and the marching columns were commencing to break up and go into camp in the fields that lined the road. They were not in sight of Hastings, which had grown overnight into a city of thousands.

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It was completely surrounded by camps on every side, and more troops seemed to be pouring in constantly from every direction.

Jack turned around in his seat.

"Do you know anybody in Hastings that would put us up overnight, mother?" he asked.

"Not a soul," answered Mrs. Ranney.

"Because," Jack explained, "there won't be the least use in trying to reach a hotel. They'll be jammed to the roof."

Their way was suddenly blocked by an officer, who signaled them to stop.

"You're trying to reach Hastings?" he asked, pleasantly enough; then, when they told him that they were, "I'd advise you not to try it. You'll find it much easier to get in than to get out, and there won't be a place for you to stay."

"But what are we going to do?" wailed the two women in chorus.

The officer shrugged his shoulders.

"You'd have been vastly better off if you'd stayed in Pittsfield, I think," he answered.

CHAPTER IV

THEY held a hurried conference. The officer advised them to retrace their course for a few miles and put up for the night at some farm-house.

"But I wouldn't go far," he ended. "To tell the truth, we don't know just where the enemy is, and they may be closer than we think. Not all roads might prove safe."

They took his advice and drove back the way they had come. The two women were beginning to be frightened, and Tom and Jack were by no means easy in mind themselves. It was growing dark rapidly, they could make but slow progress through the congested country, and from time to time now they were stopped by sentries, and there were long delays before they were allowed to go on their way.

Jack lighted the big headlights and turned from one road into another. It seemed that they would never get clear of the wide-

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spread soldiers, and until they did there was no use looking for shelter. Every farmhouse had been turned to some use, and the farm-yards and barns were full of horses, men, guns, and wagons.

It was after six o'clock and perfectly dark when they finally got into country which seemed clear of troops. They drove for a mile or so, when the glare of their lights showed them a little group of horsemen in the road ahead. Jack put on the brakes with a groan.

"Another army!" he sighed.

The cavalry outpost warned them against the danger of going much farther. Unquestionably the enemy was in some force north of Hastings.

"There's a house half a mile up the road," the sergeant in command of the four men told them. "You'd better try and stay there."

A few moments later Jack ran the car into a lane, and a big collie came barking toward them. They soon found the farmer and his wife, both of them thoroughly frightened by the recent passage of the army and glad enough of company for the night.

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"Sure ye can stay," the farmer said, heartily. "Supper 'll be ready by the time you boys get your machine under shelter."

It seemed very strange to be eating in the dim light of an oil-lamp with these two people they had never seen before in their lives. All four of the travelers were tired, and as soon as the meal was finished the farmer's wife took Mrs. Blakesley and Mrs. Ranney up-stairs.

"You boys 'll have to take the floor," the farmer told them. "We ain't got much room."

A couple of old mattresses and some blankets were spread on the floor for them, but the farmer—a gaunt man of middle age—was in no hurry to leave them. He filled a corn-cob pipe, sat down in a chair, and began to talk.

"Maybe you boys know what this here war's all about. Do ye?" he began.

Tom thought he did. He had read the papers at the outbreak of war, and his father had explained to him the things which he did not understand. He tried to remember these things and to put them into words.

"Oh, shucks!" the farmer interrupted him. "What's all that got to do with me and you?"

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Nothin'! You bet it ain't. You and me didn't want no war, did we? But what could we do to stop it? And there are a whole lot more just like us. All them soldiers that have been marchin' past here all day—d'ye suppose they wanted war? I guess not!

"And look what it's cost me to-day! They busted up some new fence I'd just got in, and let my stock out into a field where they ruined my melons. They used a hull lot o' rails last night for fire-wood. Oh, they had to have it. I ain't denyin' that. But where do I come in? I've got to quit plowin', and spend three days fixin' fences. And then, like as not, they'll be back on me, runnin' off stock and doin' a lot more damage. Oh yes, this war business just suits me fine!"

The boys were so sleepy that they dropped off while the old man was still talking, but not before their young minds had received some new ideas. Tom had never before realized that battle-fields consisted, after all, of some poor farmer's ruined pastures and fields, and that armies, from the farmer's standpoint, were not much better than great flocks of locusts, eating up the land over which they passed.

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It was still dark when they were awakened the next morning by the sounds of the farmer moving about the room. They saw him lighting a lantern and drawing on a pair of cotton gloves.

"Needn't get up yet," he told them. "I gotta do my chores—if them soldiers have left me anything."

But Tom and Jack were willing enough to get up. There was a great deal to be done. They realized that for the first time in their lives they were thrown upon their own resources and that it was no ordinary emergency they had to face. They had to decide upon their course, and they had to decide quickly.

"I've got gas enough to get twenty miles farther," Jack said, "or maybe thirty, but I don't dare risk more than that. And we must be pretty close to a hundred miles from Bradley."

When the farmer came in they asked his advice.

"Yes," he said, "you must be pretty nigh that far away. I don't know nothin' about the roads. It's been dry so long, they oughta be fair. Best thing for you is to strike for

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Medford. Can't miss it." And he launched into a description of the course they must follow.

They had a rather shivery breakfast in the cold room, and wasted no time in getting the car ready for the road. The farmer refused to take any pay.

"Nope, not a cent," he said. "I'm glad enough of the chance to help."

They made the trip of twenty-five miles to Medford without incident. The country through which they drove seemed strangely silent and deserted after the crowded roads and fields full of troops they had seen the previous afternoon. They reached the village shortly after daylight, and wasted as little time as possible in filling the gasoline-tank and getting their directions for the next stage of their journey.

The man who filled their tank at the little garage was a talkative fellow, and had to have all the details of their journey from Pittsfield before he was satisfied. Then, when they had told their story, he pushed back his cap and put his hands on his hips with an air of importance.

"Well," he said, "you weren't the only

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ones who saw queer things last night. I saw something too."

"What?" they asked him.

"Yesterday afternoon," he explained, "I took my car and drove about twelve miles north. I knew where there was a big flock of ducks that I was going to have, war or no war, and I went after 'em. I stayed till after dark, and I hadn't more than started home when I had a puncture, and it took me better than an hour to fix it.

"I'd just started to put away my tools when I heard something overhead. I thought it was a flock of ducks, and then I knew it was gasoline-engines."

"Aeroplanes!" exclaimed the boys. "We saw one yesterday."

The garage man shook his head.

"They weren't aeroplanes," he said. "I know an aeroplane engine when I hear one. And these were different. They were smaller motors, and they weren't very high-powered. And there were an awful lot of 'em."

"Couldn't you see anything?" Tom asked.

"Not a thing," the man answered. "And I was glad I couldn't. I was scared. And

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"I'm scared yet," he answered, taking off his cap and wiping his forehead.

After they were on the road the boys discussed the man's queer tale in low tones, having decided that it was better to tell their mothers nothing about it.

"What do you suppose it was?" Jack asked. "He didn't look like a man that would imagine all that."

"They might have been aeroplanes so high up that the noise of the engines sounded very faint," Tom answered. "I don't see what else it could have been."

"Dirigible ballons," Jack suggested.

Tom thought not.

"They haven't tried to do much with dirigible ballons like those big Zeppelins in Germany since they've perfected aeroplanes," he said. "They aren't as good."

And, though they talked about it for some time longer, they could arrive at no definite conclusion. They seemed to have passed into a different country. There was no trace of the army to be seen in any direction. Men were plowing in the fields, stock wandering about in the pastures. Fences were unbroken, and the telegraph and telephone

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wires did not seem to have been tampered with.

Luckily, the Ranneys' big car seemed to realize that a good deal might depend upon it, and gave them no trouble. The engine ran smoothly, and they had no tire trouble. The roads, while by no means excellent, were far from bad, and allowed them to maintain an average speed that was close to twenty miles an hour. Every time they inquired their way they received the same answer: "Follow the wires!" Their road seemed as easy as though the path had been marked ahead of them with a white streak.

When they stopped at noon to eat the lunch they had bought in Medford Jack told them that they had left that village more than forty miles behind them and that Bradley could not be more than thirty-five miles ahead.

"I'm sure I hope it's closer," Mrs. Ranney confessed. "I never thought I should be tired of riding in an automobile, but I have had quite enough for once."

"If we find more soldiers at Bradley," added Mrs. Blakesley, "I shall wish we had never left your father, Tom. I'm worried enough about our going, as it is."

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Both the boys tried to convince the two women that there was no possible chance of finding any trace of the army ahead of them. Pittsfield was undoubtedly the enemy's objective, and it was in that direction that both armies would be concentrated. Bradley, a sleepy country town with a single line of railroad, was a place of no strategic importance to either side.

They had been driving half an hour or such a matter after their lunch when they saw a horse and buggy coming rapidly toward them. It was the first vehicle of any sort they had met for some time, and they watched its approach with more interest than they would ordinarily have shown.

"Jack," Tom said, suddenly, in a low voice, "look at the man who's driving! He's using his whip for all he's worth, and that horse is running. You'd better give him the road."

CHAPTER V

JACK turned the car toward the ditch, and in no time the horse and buggy were abreast of them. The buggy contained a man and a woman, and, as Tom had seen, the man was slashing his horse savagely. The woman, who looked very white and frightened, was hanging on for dear life.

As they passed in a cloud of dust the farmer called something over his shoulder, of which they could only catch the words "turn round" and "big balloons."

"He told us to turn around!" exclaimed Mrs. Blakesley.

Mrs. Ranney said nothing, but turned very white. Tom began to feel the same queer sensation which had clutched him the morning before when he had seen the frenzied crowd in front of the bank. He tried his best to fight it down, but it would not go. He looked once at Jack and saw that he too was frightened.

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"Funny," Tom said to himself. "We've been right through an army, and I haven't been scared at all. And now the sight of a man whipping his horse and yelling frightens me. Tom Blakesley, you're a baby!"

He tried to whistle, but it was not easy, and the feeble tune his puckered lips produced was no tune he had ever heard in his life. He was undergoing his first lesson in real terror. Before the day was done he was to realize that it is the unseen, unknown dangers, and not the things that can be faced openly, that really terrify.

An instant later Jack thrust his elbow against Tom's side without letting go his hold on the steering-wheel.

"Don't say anything," Jack whispered, "but aren't those soldiers in the field, way off there to the left?"

Tom looked. At first he saw nothing except a broad stretch of bare fields against a background of gray woods, but finally his eyes made out a scampering group of tiny figures, perhaps half or three-quarters of a mile away.

"Yes," he whispered back, "they're soldiers, all right. And what in the world are they running so for?"

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Jack made no answer, but suddenly opened his throttle and threw his spark almost as far forward as it would go. The big car leaped forward with a jerk that almost threw its occupants from their seats. The two women cried out in protest, but Jack did not turn his head.

"Those men are trying to head us off," he whispered to Tom.

It did not require much time for Tom to see that Jack's guess had been correct. The scampering figures were certainly heading for the road at the top of their speed, and the only possible object they could have was the stopping of the car. There was not another living thing in sight in any direction.

"Maybe you'd better stop," Tom suggested.

Jack stubbornly refused. He had had his fill of driving in the last twenty-four hours, and the one thing in his mind was to get to Bradley with all possible speed. If he could avoid a parley with the soldiers he intended to do it.

It was evident that the car would win the short but spirited race. It was traveling forty-five miles an hour, and would pass the

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point toward which the soldiers were running while they were still some distance away. Tom forgot his caution and entered wholly into the spirit of the thing.

"Give her a little more, Jack," he advised, "and we'll beat 'em easy."

Jack was wholly occupied with handling the car, and the two women had their hands full in saving themselves from being jolted about and out of their seats. Tom alone had time to watch the soldiers and to witness their unexpected manœuvre.

They had been running forward in a group, perhaps twenty of them in all, in no particular order. Now they suddenly halted, spread out in a line, and dropped to their knees. Tom's eye caught a sudden movement of their rifles, and his heart jumped into his throat. They were going to fire at the car!

He wanted to cry out a warning, but he felt exactly as he did when in the grip of a nightmare. He could not open his lips; his tongue seemed perfectly immovable. He could only stare with wide eyes.

Just as the car went roaring past he saw an officer raise his hand with a sudden quick gesture, and the twenty rifles dropped. The

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officer had evidently seen that there were women in the car.

But Tom had seen one other thing. He had seen that the soldiers were dressed in uniforms of bluish gray and that they wore black boots and queer-looking peaked caps!

"Those weren't our men," he whispered to Jack, when he could get his tongue to work. "They were the other fellows!"

Jack had commenced to reduce the car's speed.

"What!" he exclaimed, incredulously.

"I saw them plain," Tom continued, "and they were dressed just like the man who came to the house night before last."

"But how could they be here?" Jack demanded, "right behind our own army?"

"I don't know," admitted Tom, "but they're here, and that's all there is to it. I guess you'd better push this car for all you're worth."

They had reached the end of the long level stretch and were climbing the first grade of a steep hill. The grade was severe, and even with the start they had had they were soon forced to go into second speed and finally into third. The powerful engine roared, and the car was tilted at a sharp angle.



AND THERE, BEHIND THE WOODS, TWENTY OR THIRTY HUGE BLACK SHAPES HUNG IN THE
AIR A FEW FEET ABOVE THE GROUND

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Tom turned in his seat and looked back. The country was spread out below him like a map. He started to look for the soldiers he had seen a few minutes before, but another sight caught his eye and made him forget everything else.

They had risen high above the wide plain, and the screen of timber which had cut off their view in one direction no longer served as a curtain for what lay behind it.

And there, behind the woods, twenty or thirty huge black shapes hung in the air a few feet above the ground, and the fields around them were black with men! One glance was enough. Tom had seen many pictures of dirigible balloons; he knew what the black shapes were without asking.

His sharp cry made the other three occupants of the car turn and follow the direction of his gaze.

"That's what the man at the garage heard last night!" Tom cried. "A whole fleet of those balloons passed over his head. And that's how their soldiers got in behind our army so quickly and how their men appear at such unexpected places."

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Jack had allowed the car to lose headway and come to a stop.

"What had we better do?" he asked.

"Do!" exclaimed Tom. "There's nothing to do but get to Bradley as fast as we can and tell what we've seen. Our army doesn't seem to know anything about these balloons, and if the wires haven't all been cut they may be able to get word to them somehow from Bradley."

CHAPTER VI

WITHIN a few seconds they were over the top of the hill, and the strange scene they had been watching had completely disappeared. Jack made the big car purr, and Tom kept looking back, momentarily expecting to see one of the cigar-like black shapes soaring above the trees.

As they sped along he was busily trying to think what course ought to be taken. His fear had vanished. He could think of nothing except the necessity of conveying his information to some American force as quickly as possible.

Little as Tom understood of the science of war—a far different thing now from what it had been a generation or two before—he could not help realizing in a vague way what the enemy's fleet of balloons might accomplish. He knew that an army feared nothing so much as a force in its rear, and he knew, too, that the size of the hostile force did not make

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so much difference. Phrases that he had read, such as "cutting of communications," "cut off from their base," and the like, kept popping into his head.

What could they do—a pair of boys, utterly without knowledge of war, burdened with the responsibility of taking care of their mothers, and yet suddenly come into possession of information which might be of the utmost value to their country?

A shout from Jack interrupted his train of thought.

"There's Bradley down there in the valley," Jack said, eagerly. "I'd know that court-house tower among a hundred."

"Keep your eyes open for any of our troops," Tom suggested. "If we see any we've got to tell 'em about those balloons."

"But they must know all about it here," Jack said. "It can't be more than five or six miles from the town to the field where those balloons were."

"But they came in the night," Tom pointed out, "and probably they haven't moved since. Maybe that man who was whipping his horse was the only one that had seen them at all."

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"He must have told some one about it by this time," Jack said.

"That doesn't make any difference," Tom persisted. "He wasn't thinking about telling anybody. He was just plain scared, and he was running away as fast as he could. I guess we'd be doing the same thing if those black balloons had come down into our fields in the night. When he thinks he's out of danger, that 'll be all he cares about."

The car was swinging down a long hill toward the village. Not a soldier was to be seen, not a sign of a supply-train or anything connected with war. They entered the village, and the noise of their engine and the speed at which they were traveling brought people to their doors and windows.

Main Street bore its every-day appearance. A few people were on the sidewalks, with a little crowd in front of the post-office. Teams were hitched to the tie-rails in front of the stores. It was evident enough that war had not touched Bradley and that the inhabitants of the town had no fear of it.

Without slackening speed Jack drove through the business part of town, turned a corner, and a few minutes later was tooting

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his horn in front of Grandfather Blakesley's big brick house.

Mr. and Mrs. Blakesley came out onto the porch, and Mr. Blakesley came hurrying down the walk to the street, smiling cheerfully.

"Well, this *is* a pleasant surprise!" he began; then he caught sight of the luggage stowed in the tonneau of the car and read something in the faces of the four people.

"What's happened?" he demanded, sharply.

Both Mrs. Blakesley and Mrs. Ranney had kept up splendidly through the long, intensely exciting ride, but now that the danger was over they broke down completely. Grandmother Blakesley hurried down from the porch, and they were soon inside the house.

Mr. Blakesley called the two boys aside.

"Now, Tom," he said, "tell me the whole story."

When he heard of the presence of the hostile balloons he shook his head.

"War's come to be a strange thing," he said, slowly. "I almost wish I hadn't lived to see it. I don't know what you can do.

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The wires are cut, just as you suspected. They were cut last night. We thought our own troops had done it, and we couldn't see why. There hasn't been a soldier in Bradley, you see."

Tom had been thinking hard, and his mind was made up.

"We've got to do it ourselves, Jack!" he announced.

His grandfather and Jack stared at him in astonishment.

"Somehow or other," Tom went on, "we've got to get word to the American army. They may find out about it long before—they may know it now—but there's a chance that they won't."

"We can't go back the way we came," Jack objected; "they'd get us sure."

"You don't mean you propose to drive back in search of some of our men?" demanded Mr. Blakesley.

"Yes, I do!" Tom answered.

At this moment there came the sound of some one running up the board walk that led to the street. They looked out the window and saw a middle-aged man without a hat hurrying up the steps.

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"It's come, Blakesley; it's come!" he panted, as the door was opened for him. "Jeff Wilkes saw some of their soldiers on the Plank Road outside town not ten minutes ago, and they're coming this way!"

CHAPTER VII

WITH the descent of the Blue troops upon Bradley all chance of carrying a message to the American army by means of the automobile vanished. After the first moment of disappointment (for Tom and Jack had at least imagined that they were only too anxious to make the attempt) the boys found that they were glad enough of the chance to rest.

Until this moment they had not fully realized how tired they were, but now even the knowledge that Blue infantry were actually entering Bradley could not excite them, and within half an hour both of them were between the fresh sheets of two big beds, careless and forgetful of wars and armies.

It was dark when they awoke, and they hurried at once to Mr. Blakesley for news of the afternoon. He had little enough to tell them. A few of the Blue infantry in their peaked caps had marched into town during

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the afternoon, requisitioned supplies, and marched out again.

"Just what they're after is beyond me," the old man admitted. "Back in the sixties, when I carried a musket, we didn't have to worry about an army's jumping over our heads through the air and landing behind us. Of course, a force in the rear of our own troops is a pretty serious thing, and yet they can't carry many men in their balloons, and they can't possibly carry guns in them. We'll just have to wait and see what they're after. They're clever people, the Blues. We can be sure that they've done this with some pretty shrewd object in view."

Tom went to bed that night with the feeling that he had become another person during the last forty-eight hours. Here it was only Thursday night, and no longer ago than Tuesday morning (only day before yesterday!) he had started off for school in the most ordinary fashion, and the consciousness that he had not done all his Latin had been the greatest of his troubles.

And now school and all the other ordinary things of the life at home seemed very far away. He wondered what was going on in

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Pittsfield and what his father was doing. It was hard to realize that no telegraph wires or newspapers could bring him the news and that there were no trains running on the single line of railroad.

Tom did not worry about his father. All his life he had turned to him in times of trouble of all sorts, and even war and the presence of hostile armies, he felt sure, would hold neither terror nor danger for his father.

Thinking of such things, Tom lay wide awake in bed, staring at the ceiling above him. He was startled by a sudden flash of light on the wall of the room. He decided that it must have been a chance ray from an arc-light somewhere or perhaps the light of a distant automobile. He had almost forgotten it when there came a second flicker of white light, and this time, instead of being on the ceiling overhead or on one of the side-walls, it was on the floor almost beneath the window.

Tom was out of bed and across the room in an instant. He knew that a flash of light which showed on the floor could only have come from one direction, and he had a suspicion of what he might see.

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Grandfather Blakesley's house stood well out on the edge of Bradley, and on higher ground than that occupied by most of the houses and buildings of the village, so that from his window Tom could look clear across the town and out over the same country through which they had driven that morning.

Instinctively his eyes turned in the general direction of the distant woodland which had hidden the Blue balloons from their sight as they drove.

For a time he could see nothing unusual, nor could he make out any source from which the brilliant ray of light had come. It was late, and most of the lights in Bradley had been extinguished. A few stars showed, but the sky was for the most part overcast with clouds. He could make out the vague outlines of trees and buildings, and could even see the distant twinkle of red and green signal lights in the deserted railroad-yards.

A cold wind whistled in at the open window, and Tom shivered, but no idea of deserting his post occurred to him. He picked his sweater and trousers off the chair, pulled them on over his pajamas, and went back to the window.

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He had not long to wait. Suddenly a great white eye opened in the air overhead, a straight beam of light illuminated the shingled roof of a house for an instant, then the eye closed as suddenly as it had appeared.

Tom waited for no more. Very cautiously he opened his door, crept out into the hall and down the passage to Jack's room.

"Get up quick!" he whispered, as soon as Jack was awake. "The Blues are doing something with their balloons. Get your clothes on and come out into the hall. I'll wait for you."

"Where we going?" Jack demanded, through chattering teeth, as he climbed out of bed.

"Out where we can see," Tom whispered, as he went back into the hall.

Three minutes later, each with his shoes in his hand, the two boys met at the head of the stairs.

"Careful now," warned Tom, "these stairs are squeaky. We can get out all right. I know how the lock on the front door works."

It was cold on the front porch, and for just an instant, as they put on their shoes with trembling fingers, Tom wished himself back in the warm bed he had left.

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"Now," proposed Tom, "let's wait right here until we hear the engines or one of them shows its search-light again."

Even as he spoke another brief shimmer of light showed in the air, but this time, instead of being over the village, it was far off to one side.

"Did you see it?" demanded Tom.

"It's a long ways off," answered Jack, with no very great show of interest.

Tom made a sudden resolve. "Let's get closer," he proposed. Jack demurred.

"If we had the car," he said, "we might do it. But we can't get it out without waking everybody up—and they wouldn't let us go. There's nothing to see, anyway."

But Tom was not paying any attention to his companion's words. He stood with his head bent forward, listening intently. The faint sound (familiar enough, though he had never heard it half a dozen times in his life) of a gasoline-motor sputtering somewhere high up in the air had reached his ear.

"Hear it?" he whispered.

"Yes."

The two boys stood listening. It had been strange enough when they had heard the sound

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of the motor in the air above them the day before, but at night it was doubly strange; it seemed as though the air-craft was some huge bird of the night. At times the sound drew nearer, then passed farther away. They would make up their minds that the airship had gone, only to hear the whirring approach them again.

"You can stand out here in the cold if you want to," Jack exclaimed, after several minutes. "I'm going back to bed."

Tom seized his companion's arm.

"Wait a minute," he urged. "There's something funny about this. What's that thing doing, anyhow?"

"I don't know—nor care," came through Jack's chattering teeth.

"Well, I do!" Tom broke out, in sudden enlightenment. "It's going round and round in a big circle, hunting for something on the ground underneath it. And what's more, it's no dirigible—it's an aeroplane. That's the same kind of a motor we heard yesterday morning, and at the fair in Pittsfield two years ago."

"Then it must be an American aeroplane," Jack said.

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"Yes," agreed Tom, "and it's hunting for those Blue balloons."

For a moment the two boys had nothing to say. Their thoughts moved too rapidly for speech. If their guess had been correct, and it was the engine of an American airship whirring up there in the darkness, what did it all mean? Was it possible that the sounds had not been heard in the Blue camp behind the woods? Did the Blues fear to send their own larger but perhaps clumsier air-craft up to cope with the aeroplane? Were they waiting for morning, fearing to risk an aerial battle in the darkness? Or were the big black shapes even now hovering somewhere over their heads?

Without speaking to each other Jack and Tom slipped quietly across the wet grass of the lawn, out of the gate, and into the street. They did not stop to consider the possible danger into which they were running or the fears that would be felt at the Blakesleys' if their beds should be found empty in the morning.

They were drawn on irresistibly by the startling possibilities of the thoughts which had popped into their heads. The mere idea

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of a battle fought in midair carried with it such a wild thrill of excitement that all other considerations dropped from their minds.

"Any idea what time it is?" Jack asked, softly, as they walked swiftly down the dark street.

"I heard a clock somewhere strike three just before I called you," answered Tom, "and we've been up more than half an hour, I guess."

"It won't be light before half past five," Jack said.

"I know," admitted Tom, "but I don't think anything will happen before it's light. And there's not so much chance of our being seen."

All Bradley seemed sound asleep. Every house that they passed was dark. Main Street was illuminated by a string of feeble arc-lights which seemed only to intensify the darkness and to make the shadows in the store entrances deeper.

"Did your grandfather say the Blues had left town?" Jack asked.

"He didn't say," Tom replied. "That's why we've got to go slow and keep our eyes open."

CHAPTER VIII

FOR all their fears, they did not encounter a single human being in the course of their long walk through the sleeping village. If the Blue infantry had made any stay after gathering their supplies they had not passed the night in Bradley.

Once in the open country, the boys threw off some of their caution and quickened their pace. They did not need to discuss the direction they should take. Both of them knew well enough where they were going. Had they taken time to consider their adventure thoughtfully they would have turned back in a hurry. But excitement had made them careless of such things. And the sounds that came to them from time to time told them that the mysterious aeroplane was still wheeling in great circles through the night. Had they needed an additional spur, these sounds would have supplied it.

Out in the country the darkness did not

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seem as intense as it had inside the village. The road stretched before them a faint gray streak, and they could even see the fence-posts and the branches of trees that lined the road. The first few farm-houses they passed lay in darkness, but they came after a bit to one where a lantern flickered among the barns.

"It's getting toward morning," Tom said, hopefully. "There's a farmer up."

They had gone only a few hundred yards farther when Tom happened to look back toward town. Instantly he stopped in his tracks, stretching out his hand and grasping Jack's sleeve.

It was a strange sight which they watched. The aeroplane had come straight above the town, and the men in it either decided that caution was no longer necessary or took a long risk. They had suddenly turned on their search-light and were turning it this way and that upon the sleeping town.

Like a bar of white paint the ray of light darted here and there, lighting up now a barn, now a house, now a clump of trees, which stood out sharply for an instant, then were swallowed up in the darkness. For perhaps

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three minutes this strange search was continued, then the light was shut off and the aeroplane shot away.

Distances were deceptive in the darkness. Tom and Jack both knew that this hill which overlooked the Blue encampment must be fully five miles from Bradley, and they were prepared for a long walk. The sudden dropping away of the ground on the sides of the road told them where they were—although it did not seem to them that they had been walking more than half an hour.

At the top of the hill they stopped and stared through the darkness toward the spot where the Blues had been encamped the day before. Tom had expected to see a glow of light, if nothing more, but the whole face of the country was blankly dark.

"They've gone!" exclaimed Jack.

"I'm not sure of that," Tom answered. "Maybe they've just put out all the lights and are trying to keep hidden. Those balloons have got to have some place to go to for gas. They can't depend on their motors, like an aeroplane. Let's get closer."

Stealing forward like a pair of shadows was familiar work. Jack and Tom realized

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that the mornings on which they had crawled cautiously through the light of early morning toward ponds and marshes where ducks were sleeping had not been wasted. They had learned the trick of steadying their nerves and forcing themselves to advance slowly and noiselessly. They did not make rapid progress, but it would have taken a sharp pair of ears to hear their approach.

For perhaps fifteen minutes they pushed forward in this fashion, feeling their way, walking with bent heads and stooping shoulders, until they came to a wire fence which barred their progress.

Now a wire fence presents no difficulties to a pair of active boys intent only on getting over it in the least possible time. But Jack and Tom had learned that where silence is at a premium a wire fence is almost as bad as a carpet of dry fallen leaves. Once a flock of Canada geese, hidden from sight by bushes, had leaped honking into the air at the first rusty creak of a wire fence. And a fortunate thing it proved that the two boys remembered this incident and stopped short before they attempted to cross the fence.

As they lay cautiously poking about in

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the darkness to find a gap through which they could crawl without disturbing the wires there sounded a few yards in front of them a faint tinkle and clank of metal, and the noise of a man shifting his position. An instant later a man's voice spoke a few words in a low tone, and a second voice, farther away, answered.

The boys were so close to the speakers that they could easily tell that the words had not been spoken in English. They had learned all that they wanted to know. They had crawled to within a few yards of the Blue sentries—sure proof that the fields behind the woods were still occupied—and but for the fortunate circumstance of the fence they would have walked straight into the enemy's hands!

Not until they had crawled back two or three hundred yards did they venture to speak, and then only in a whisper.

"Whew!" gasped Jack. "That's close enough for me. I'm shaking all over. Aren't you?"

"Yes," admitted Tom, glad to learn that somebody else's knees were wabbling.

"Let's get back toward the road," he add-

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ed; "there's an old haystack where we can hide."

Inside the haystack it was gratefully warm, and the two boys burrowed down until only their heads showed, and waited for the dawn. It was not the first time they had lain hidden waiting for the eastern sky to turn gray, but no sunrise they had ever watched had shown them such a sight as was in store for them.

Sky and earth seemed to turn darker instead of lighter, the aeroplane was no longer audible, and there was no sound whatever from the fields and woods in front of them. They seemed to be lying in the midst of a deserted country. Moreover, the first warmth of their shelter had passed, and both boys were shivering mightily.

"I guess it never will—" Jack had begun, when Tom's grip on his shoulder silenced him.

There was no doubt about the sounds which reached them now. A body of men was tramping past within a few feet of them. The boys held their breath. It seemed to Tom that the loud hammering of his heart must be audible ten yards away and that it would certainly reveal their presence. They actu-

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ally caught a dim glimpse of moving figures, which came out of the darkness, showed faintly for an instant, and were gone. They heard the creak and rattle of the wire fence, a muttered order or two, and a loud thump and clatter as some one tripped and fell over a wire. A few seconds later everything was as silent as before.

"They came from behind us!" Jack said, as soon as they dared speak.

"I know it," answered Tom. "They must have had patrols out everywhere — and we came right through the line of them this morning! It's a wonder we weren't caught."

"We'll never get out again," Jack said, rather shakily.

"I'm not bothering about that," Tom replied. "It won't be bad if they can see us. The danger was that we might run into them in the dark."

At last the stubborn black of the eastern sky began to give way. First came a faint tinge of gray that was scarcely perceptible, then a deeper color and a touch of yellow. The black bulk of the woods, which had been only a deeper shadow in the night, took on

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something of its true character, and a tracery of branches was outlined against the sky.

But the boys had no interest for the ordinary phenomena of dawn. Their eyes were straining into the grayness straight before them. Already there were muffled sounds that told them the Blues were moving. They could hear a dull hammering, a mutter of voices; and finally—although astonishingly faint—the explosions of an engine.

An instant later a great black shape lifted slowly above the fringe of trees and swung up into the air. The big dirigibles had looked sinister enough in full daylight from the seats of the speeding automobile. Viewed in the half-light of early dawn, as it soared almost noiselessly up into the air, the balloon looked like some uncouth monster, and the boys unconsciously shrank lower into the damp hay.

Hardly had the first dirigible cleared the tops of the trees when a second followed it, and another on the heels of that, until twelve of the black shapes had gone up into the air.

Tom and Jack could not see anything but the gas-bags clearly, but they could make out that the cars slung beneath the balloons

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proper were larger and stronger in construction than any they had ever seen illustrated in pictures, and that each car seemed to contain several men.

"I wish you'd tell me how all twelve of those big things could remain hidden all night while that aeroplane was scouring the country with its search-light," Jack said.

Tom had been thinking of the same thing and had hit upon no explanation. Of course, it was possible that it had been purely a matter of chance, but this was not likely, and Tom believed that the Blues must know a great many things about aeronautics as applied to war that their opponents had not dreamed of. Not until much later was Tom destined to learn the real explanation.

There was no time now for pondering over such problems, however perplexing they might be. The twelve dirigibles had become faint gray shapes and then vanished in the void of the morning sky, but the slow muffled sounds of their propelling motors showed that they were not moving far from the fields which had sheltered them during the night.

It began to look as though the Blues intended nothing more than a scouting expe-

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dition with their airships when there sounded from the air a series of shrill whistles not unlike the notes of an automobile horn.

Instantly the slow, faint throbbing of the motors turned into a rattling, crackling roar that sounded like the racket of a machine-shop, with every machine clacking at full speed, or a sudden burst of firing. Out of the misty gray sky came a rushing black shape, its motor spitting fire, the speed of its whizzing flight making a rushing sound like waves on a beach. So close did it come to the haystack that the boys felt the rush of wind, and so rapid was its swooping descent that they thought at first it must have fallen.

Before they had a chance to voice this thought, however, the big dirigible, righting itself with surprising ease, shot off across the woods, just clearing the tree-tops, its siren tooting steadily. One after another the Blue air-craft shot down, circled the field behind the woods, then shot back into the air.

For the first time Jack and Tom caught clearer glimpses of the cars. They could see that each of them held from fifteen to twenty men and that at each end of every car was a rapid-fire gun of some sort, its gunners par-

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tially hidden behind light screens of steel. These balloons were not mere scouting-craft; they were fighting-machines of no small power.

It was still too dark for them to make out what it was that had caused the sudden confusion among the Blue forces. All of the dirigibles had risen again and were climbing to greater heights than they had reached on the first ascent, for their motors, although every one of them was now hammering away at full speed, sounded more and more faintly.

Around the edges of the woods Blue soldiers were scurrying this way and that, apparently busy about something inside the shelter of the timber which the boys could not see.

"Let's get up on the stack," Tom proposed. "They're too busy to pay any attention to us."

By the time they had wriggled to this point of vantage the air had cleared somewhat and the light had increased sufficiently so that the wonderful sight in the cloudless sky was as clear as though the sun had been shining brightly.

Above them—some of them so literally above them that the two boys had to lean backward to look up at them—were the

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twelve Blue airships, moving at good speed in a formation much like that of a flock of geese, veering now this way, now that, sometimes tilting their prows and climbing to greater heights, and others sliding swiftly down to lower levels. Yet through all these manoeuvres they did not sail far in any direction. It appeared to be a sort of aerial parade, and for a time the boys could not understand what was causing these operations.

"What makes them stand still," Jack muttered, "and what in the world makes those swallows stay right above them?"

"Swallows!" repeated Tom. "What are you talking about?"

"Why," explained Jack, "haven't you noticed those birds clear above the balloons flying about just as they are?"

Tom rolled over on his back and stared straight up with all his eyes. There, sure enough, was a little cloud of darting shapes, much higher up than the black bulks of the Blue craft.

"Birds nothing!" he shouted suddenly. "They're aeroplanes!"

CHAPTER IX

THEN commenced a spectacle that made the boys forget everything else, made them crane their necks until the aching muscles seemed about to break, and turned such things as cold, discomfort, and hunger into forgotten trifles.

It was evident that both the adversaries in this strange conflict were trying to lure each other into unfavorable positions and that each hesitated to leave the position where it could fight to the best advantage. The aeroplanes, darting about like the swallows for which Jack had mistaken them, clung to their dizzy heights, and the Blues seemed to hesitate to go up after them. Swiftly as the dirigibles could travel, it was quite evident that they were no match for the smaller air-craft in point of mobility.

Suddenly, while the boys were straining their eyes toward the tiny shapes in the air, there was an explosion in a field some hun-

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dreds of yards away from them. They looked around in time to see a cloud of smoke drifting off in the light breeze, and at the same instant there were two more explosions, a short pause, then three more in quick succession.

They looked into each other's faces, horror-struck. The same thought occurred to them—that they were being fired upon by the Blue soldiers in the woods. Then in a flash Tom understood.

"They're bombs!" he exclaimed. "The men in the aeroplanes are trying to drop bombs onto the balloons."

Of course, bombs dropped from air-craft several thousand feet in the air were even more dangerous to the two boys than shells fired from a battery would have been, but somehow the mere fact that they were not being deliberately fired upon made their danger seem less.

And for the second time that morning such a thrill of excitement as they had never known made them almost oblivious to their own danger.

If, a few days before, some one had told Tom Blakesley that within the week he would be in danger of his life, and yet looking upon

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a sight so far in excess of anything he had ever read or dreamed that he would be able to forget his own situation, he would have been about as far from believing it as a boy could be.

Even now, as he lay watching the wonderful spectacle in the air above him, he could not quite realize that he was awake—that he had climbed from the familiar bed at Grandfather Blakesley's, tramped through the darkness, and actually witnessed the strange events which had passed before his eyes.

Of the strange conflict in the air he could see nothing in detail. The Blues, evidently not relishing the shower of bombs, some of which must have passed close to the great bags of inflammable gas, had finally tilted their prows and faced the dangers of the thinner air higher up.

As the huge balloons dwindled to mere specks it was impossible to tell how their height compared with that of their opponents or what tactics the hostile forces were pursuing. It looked like nothing but two flocks of queer-shaped birds dodging and twisting about.

The Blues no longer followed the V-shaped

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formation, but had scattered somewhat, though still keeping close together. Only the fact that the bombs had, for the time at least, ceased falling told the boys that the Blues must now be on the same level as the aeroplanes of the Americans.

So long as he watched the thing only as a spectacle Tom experienced no other feeling than one of tremendous excitement. It was like watching a great many balloon ascensions at the same time. But when his mind grasped the fact that men were fighting one another at that awful distance above the earth he turned suddenly faint and sick. He remembered descriptions of aeroplane accidents he had read in the newspapers, and of the feelings he had experienced on the occasion of his one visit to Washington, when he had stood at the top of the great monument and looked down.

He turned away his eyes and hid his face between his hands. He could no longer bear to watch. He was actually sorry he had come; the desire to see had suddenly left him. He would have given anything to have been safely back in Bradley.

A succession of sharp crackling reports,

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quite different from the explosions from the motors, made him look up.

"What is it?" he said to Jack.

"I don't know" (Jack's voice came to him from the hay), "unless it's the guns on the balloons."

"Can't you see anything?" Tom demanded.

"I can't look," Jack answered, with a half-sob; "I can't look!"

The banging and crackling of the guns in the air kept on, and after what seemed to him hours Tom managed to look up again. Once he had done it his eyes were held, as those of a bird are said to be held by the sight of a snake.

There seemed to be fewer of the darting aeroplanes, and they were circling about their bulkier opponents in wider swoops. Tom counted the dirigibles.

"Nine—ten—eleven—"

Where was the twelfth? To make sure that he had been right he counted them again. It was true; there were only eleven!

Tom hardly knew whether to shout for joy or burst into tears. The Americans must be winning; yet when he thought of the fearful plunge which the vanished balloon

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must have taken it was hard to be glad of it, it was hard to think at all.

He tried to turn away his eyes, but the spectacle held him, and even as he watched there came a tiny flash from one of the dirigibles. Instantly a swooping aeroplane staggered like a duck which had been fairly struck by a charge of heavy shot, staggered, dropped, seemed to make a frantic effort to recover its lost balance, then turned completely over and came plunging down like a rag tied to a stone.

"Jack," Tom managed to gasp, "let's go home! Let's get away from here!"

He heard Jack moving about in the hay, and an instant later Jack's voice came back in a whisper.

"We can't. Some of the Blue soldiers are standing right over back of us."

The boys might have been able to make their escape, so intent were the Blue infantrymen on the battle in the clouds, but Jack and Tom were too thoroughly shaken and frightened by what they had seen to run any further risks.

So, shuddering and wholly wretched, they had to lie and await the end of the terrible

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struggle. Afterward Tom was glad that he did not see everything happen. He only looked up from time to time, roused by the shouts from the soldiers or startled by a crash of firing from the air. He did see one of the dirigibles, its gas-bag sagging and pouring out smoke, come slowly down to earth on a long slant. He saw one of the American fliers make a deliberate attempt to ram a balloon, miss its mark, overturn and go whizzing down to destruction. He heard the steady rattle of the Blue machine-guns, the occasional bursting of bombs from the more fragile craft of the Americans, and once, very faintly, thin shouts and cheers floating down from the sky.

Only when the Blue soldiers broke into loud and continued shouts and cheers did the boys know that the end had come. It seemed to them that the weird battle must have been going on for hours. Tom was quite sure that he had been lying in the damp hay for ever and that the events of yesterday must have happened in some previous existence.

He raised his head and took one final look. The Blue dirigibles—only nine of them now—were coming slowly down, descending in long

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circles like cautious birds. Mere specks in the distance, the surviving aeroplanes were scudding off to safety.

"We're licked!" sobbed Jack. "They've beaten us!"

"I know it," gulped Tom, "but that's only once. We'll beat them next time. I know we will."

Like children, the boys snuggled close to each other for comfort and lay shivering while the Blue airships came slanting down to the field back of the woods and the Blue soldiers went scampering off to meet them.

They crawled stiffly down from their perch and, the instant their feet touched the ground, ran for the road as if all the Blue soldiers in the world were at their heels. Across the fields and up the long hill they went with pounding heels and panting lungs, but even fear was not a sufficient spur to carry them up such a grade, and at the top they fell into a rapid walk.

Tom had expected to find the country as deserted as it had been a few hours earlier. Unconsciously he had assumed that he and Jack had been the only witnesses of the battle in the air. But before they had gone a mile

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toward the village they encountered groups of people, white-faced and silent, all staring into the empty air or talking to one another in hushed whispers.

Closer to Bradley the scattered groups became a solid crowd. The entire village had turned out to witness the struggle. It was a strange gathering. There was none of the noisy chatter one usually finds in crowds, none of the restless shifting about. Even the small boys stood still and stared with open mouths instead of chasing one another about and shouting.

Tom and Jack had made their way for some distance before anybody spoke to them or paid any attention. Finally a big bearded man (Tom recognized him as a grocer) called to them as they passed.

"You boys better hurry along. Your folks are most crazy."

They broke into a trot, and kept it up steadily until a loud murmur from the crowd made them turn their heads. The nine balloons had again mounted into the air, strung out in a long line, and, heading to the northwest, sailed steadily off, dwindled to black dots in the distance, and disappeared.

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Two half-frantic women fairly pounced on the two boys as soon as they were in sight of the Blakesley home, but the tale that they had to tell made their thoughtless disobedience forgotten almost at once. Tom sat close to his mother, holding her hand tightly as he told the story of their experiences from the moment he had seen the first flicker of light on the wall of his room to the frightened flight from the haystack.

"And you say the Blue airships have just sailed away?" Mr. Blakesley asked, when he had finished.

"Yes," said Tom; "they all sailed off to the north while we were coming through town just now."

The old man drew a long breath.

"I'm very glad of it," he said. "Time was when I should have been glad to be close to such things, but I'm too old. I'm glad Bradley is going to be spared."

During the rest of the day the four fugitives from Pittsfield made an effort to settle themselves into the changed conditions of life. The two women would not be content until they had made every possible effort to communicate with the city, but all of them failed.

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The telegraph and telephone lines might be open in a day or two, the operators told them, but for the present Bradley was cut off from the world.

Tom and Jack had little heart for anything, although they were glad enough to busy themselves with sundry small jobs about the house and yard which Mr. and Mrs. Blakesley discovered for them. The strain and shock of the morning's experience was a thing not likely to be thrown off. If Tom closed his eyes he was sure to see the broken white shape of an aeroplane plunging down through the air; and the sound of the guns, the tooting sirens, the sputtering engines, and the cheering of the Blue soldiers were for ever ringing in his ears.

To drop back from the tremendous excitement of the past two days into the sleepy calm of Bradley life, even calmer and sleepier now that the village was cut off from communication with the rest of the world, helped to make life seem more unreal than ever to Tom. He knew that the changed conditions of war, the development of the art of flying, and the consequent ability of an army to strike such bewilderingly rapid blows had

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made such conditions possible, yet he could not bring himself to believe that Bradley had seen the last fighting it was going to witness.

The past few hours had aged him more than months of ordinary existence could have done. He found that he could sit down and talk matters over with Grandfather Blakesley almost as though they were of the same age.

"I was one of those who laughed at danger when war was declared, much as I regretted its coming," Mr. Blakesley said. "Few people realized what military geniuses the Blues are. See what they've done already! By landing these forces, small as they are, behind our army from their airships, they've broken the country into isolated sections, raised havoc with our communications, paralyzed the telegraph and railroads, and done something still worse. They've made the Americans uncertain what to expect next—and uncertainty and doubt of the enemy's intentions are the worst foes an army can have."

"But, grandfather," Tom broke out, "they won't beat us, will they? They won't be able to beat us entirely with their airships?"

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"No," Mr. Blakesley replied, steadily, a little color coming into his pale face—"no, I don't think they will. We're a great people, Tom, and we never have been beaten. We're not a race of warriors, and we've been taken unawares. But we'll find a way out, be sure of that."

CHAPTER X

THEN they fell to discussing what move the Blues were likely to make next, and found that it was quite impossible to do more than guess. Here lay Bradley, several hundred miles from the point at which the northern Blue army of invasion had established its base, and yet a blow had been struck here where it was least expected. The next one might fall anywhere. The Blue balloons might have sailed away to take their part in the campaign which must be going forward in the country about Pittsfield, or they might have gone to strike a blow at some other unprotected and unprepared part of the country.

"Ours is the hard part, Tom," Grandfather Blakesley said, soberly. "We've got to sit still and wait, and you and Jack have got to be very good to your mothers and try to keep them up. You've got to be men, both of you."

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But, although Tom's feeling that Bradley had not done with her share in the war persisted, he had little idea how soon this feeling was to be turned into a certainty.

Shortly before supper-time he went down-street on an errand. As he started to enter the grocery the door opened and two Blue soldiers came out, each with a couple of loaves of bread under his arm. They were laughing and chattering gaily, and appeared to be jovial, good-natured men, with no thoughts of war and fighting.

Startled as he was, Tom used his eyes, and discovered that, while the strange men were undoubtedly Blue soldiers, their uniform was not the same as that of the cavalryman who had come to their house in Pittsfield.

They wore the same blue clothes, black boots, and peaked cap, but their uniforms were trimmed with red instead of yellow, and there was a different cut to their short jackets. Tom even noticed that there was a different insignia above the narrow vizors of their peaked caps.

He went into the store to make his purchases. The clerk who waited on him was fairly shaking with fright.

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"I thought the Blues had gone," Tom remarked.

"So we all thought," answered the clerk, trying to tie the string with his shaking fingers; "so we all thought. And here they are back on us. There's a whole lot of them gone into camp down by the depot, and I've heard that there's another camp outside town. I haven't seen it. I don't want to. I don't like this business."

Tom walked a little ways toward the railroad-station, and had plenty of proof that the grocer's clerk was right. Blue soldiers were going in and out of all the stores. They seemed to have taken complete possession of the town. Either the airships had not taken away all the soldiers that had been carried in their cars or a new force had dropped from somewhere. But, however the presence of the hostile soldiers was to be explained, it must mean that the Blues were gathering a considerable force in the rear of the American army which was concentrating around Pittsfield, and that something more serious than the temporary breaking-up of communications was in the wind.

Tom said nothing about the presence of

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the Blues when he reached the house, but he saw, from the expression of his grandfather's face, that Mr. Blakesley had heard the news and that it worried him a good deal.

Both the boys went to bed with the feeling that the night would certainly produce more strange happenings. Tom climbed between the sheets sure that sleep was entirely out of the question. He felt staringly wide awake, and his tired brain was still grappling with the problems that were altogether too large for his solving, and painting over and over again pictures of the occurrences of the past few days.

Yet, wide awake as he thought himself, he had hardly touched the pillow before he was sound asleep. Even the tension of great excitement could not combat the natural demands of his exhausted muscles. And not only did he sleep at once, but the sun was shining brightly in at the window the next morning when he was roused by his mother's voice from the foot of the bed.

He was startled by her appearance. Only once had he seen her look as she did now, and that was when his father had been very sick. More than ever he realized how much responsibility had fallen upon him.

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"Has anything happened?" he asked, as soon as he was awake.

Mrs. Blakesley smiled at his eagerness. "You feel as though you're part of the army, don't you, dear?" she asked, with a little laugh, then went on: "No, there hasn't anything happened. The soldiers are still here, but that is all. And, Tom, you must promise me that you and Jack won't do any more wild things like yesterday morning's performance. Mr. Clement stopped this morning, and when he learned how far out into the country you boys went yesterday he said it was a wonder you ever came back alive."

Of course, Tom made the required promise, and, fearing to alarm his mother further, did not even go near the Blue encampment by the depot, although he greatly longed to do so. He and Jack spent the morning overhauling the Ranneys' car, little guessing how soon they were going to put it to a test even harder than the one it had already undergone.

At noon they left the barn where they had been working, covered with mold and dirt from head to foot, and started up the bricked path which led to the house. They were half-way to the back door when a sound of

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scrambling from the back fence attracted their attention, and they turned in time to see a man picking himself out of the burdocks and scrambling to his feet.

A single glance showed them that, whatever he might be, he was not a Blue. A second showed them that he was either sick or injured, for there was a bloody bandage about his head and he walked with a limp. He came toward them as swiftly as he could, not taking the trouble to call, and they waited for him, wondering.

"Any Blues in this town?" he demanded, as soon as he came close to them.

"Yes," answered Tom and Jack in the same breath.

They had an opportunity now to take in the details of his appearance. He was dressed in a brown shirt and trousers, with spiral puttees of the same shade. His hat was gone, and he carried no weapons except an automatic pistol in a holster at his belt. His clothes were dirty and ragged, his face deeply tanned, drawn, and covered with a stubble of black beard. He seemed completely exhausted.

"Whereabouts?" was his next question.

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"Down by the railroad," Tom told him. "There aren't any of them in this part of town."

"Where can I get hold of an auto?" inquired the man.

The boys hesitated.

"We've one in the barn," Jack said, at length.

The man stared at them as though doubtful whether he heard aright or not.

"What luck!" he muttered. "What luck!" Then he added, weakly: "Take me into the house, will you? I'm about all in."

They took him at once into the kitchen, where Grandmother Blakesley (who had learned never to be surprised at anything) took one look at him and started getting a meal for him without a word.

For a time the man sat leaning back in one of the kitchen chairs, his eyes closed, his hand going now and then to his bandaged head.

"Give me a minute or two," he pleaded, with a faint smile, "and I'll come round."

"Don't you try to talk or anything until you're fed and rested," Grandmother Blakesley commanded him, "or I won't answer for

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you! You boys go on to your dinner and send your grandfather out here."

By the time dinner had been finished the man in the tattered brown clothes had been fed, the wound in his head washed and freshly bandaged, and he appeared greatly rested and thoroughly ready to talk.

"Who owns the car in the barn?" was the first thing he said.

"It is mine," answered Mrs. Ranney.

The man smiled.

"It must seem queer to have a man come tumbling over your back fence, ma'am," he said, "and then ask you to let him have your machine without promising that you'll ever see it again."

They all looked at him in astonishment.

"But when I've told you a few things," he went on, "it won't seem quite so strange. I belong to the aero fleet. My biplane was wrecked day before yesterday, and my companion—was killed. How I escaped with my life I don't understand. Just luck. I was on my way south with important news. I didn't dare trust the wires much farther north, because the Blues have tapped them everywhere, and they seem to have the

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key to our cipher. But down here I found the wires all cut, and after my machine went to smash there was nothing to do but go ahead on foot. I was pretty badly knocked out, and I didn't make much progress. And now I seem to have tumbled right into the Blues!"

"Then you don't know what happened near here yesterday?" Mr. Blakesley interrupted.

The man looked up in evident surprise. "Why, no!" he said.

In a few words they told him the story of the fight. He listened, with his head hanging, and then struck his leg sharply with his clenched hand.

"Of course!" he exclaimed, angrily, "of course! They can't fight those dirigibles with unarmed aeroplanes. That's what we get for being ten years behind in our knowledge of aviation! How the Blues have fooled us all! You've seen nothing but the fighting-balloons, have you?"

They shook their heads, not quite certain what the aero-scout meant.

"I've seen the transports," he told them. "Great things bigger than the Zeppelins in Germany; capable of carrying two hundred men, thirty cavalymen, or two field-guns

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with their entire equipment. How they've landed those things in America is more than any of us understand—but they're here. That's how they're playing ducks and drakes with our forces. They can drop an army here to-day, pick it up to-night, and have it two hundred miles away by morning. That's the sort of thing we've got to fight,"

With an abrupt movement he got out of his chair and leaped to his feet, tightening his belt as he did so.

"But I can't waste time talking," he cried. "I've got to get to a telegraph line that will carry something, or get to Pittsfield. Our army there is being held in place just to keep it out of action. Pittsfield's in no more danger of being attacked than the moon. The Blues are gathering to attack Albany, and from Albany they'll go straight down the Hudson to New York. It's the same thing Burgoyne tried way back in the Revolution, and, by George, my friends, they'll succeed if we don't stop them, and if they do they'll split us in two!"

The man's excitement fairly carried him away for an instant, then he grew calmer, dropped back into his chair, and began to

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ask questions. How many of the Blues were there in Bradley? What chance was there of getting away in the daytime? Did they know what the roads were like?

"There's just a chance that I can get through to-night," he said, finally. "I've no authority to requisition your car, but I think you'll let me have it."

"Of course you shall have it!" exclaimed Mrs. Ranney.

There was, of course, no use of attempting flight by daylight. There was nothing to do except wait for nightfall. Tom and Jack spent their time drawing maps, trying to recall the features of the road, and doing all that they could to make it possible for the scout to make the long drive to Pittsfield in the shortest possible time.

"What can you get out of your car?" the scout asked Jack.

"You can hold her steady at twenty-five," Jack said. "We've never done it for a long stretch, because it's pretty hard driving, but you can do it."

"And can I push her right through without stopping?"

"I think you can," Jack said. "We've

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been overhauling the car to-day, and the tanks are both full. You ought to be able to get a hundred and fifty miles out of her without refilling, and it's not that far—unless you get way out of your road."

All through the afternoon the two boys continued their work on the car, doing all that lay within their power to guard against the possibility of accident. About four o'clock Tom walked down-street to see if he could find out what dispositions had been made of the Blue soldiers and whether or not any more of the hostile troops had arrived.

The encampment by the railroad, as far as he could see, had not increased in size. The same red-faced blue uniforms were visible in the streets, but their number appeared no greater. Tom went round among the stores and talked with the few farmers who had driven into town during the day. None of them reported seeing any Blue troops outside the town itself, nor did it appear that any of the roads were being guarded.

Tom hurried home with his intelligence. The scout, who had gone to bed immediately after dinner, was still sleeping like a log, and there seemed no use in waking him.

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"I don't see any reason why he can't get out," Tom told Jack, "unless they're a whole lot more watchful at night than they are in the daytime. All he'll need to do will be to get out of town on this side, drive a ways into the country, and then circle back to the right road. It looks easy to me."

As soon as it was dark the boys got out the car and drove it around to the front of the house with as little noise as possible. The scout was aroused, and Grandmother Blakesley put a package of sandwiches and a vacuum bottle full of coffee in the machine.

They had all gathered in front of the house and were waiting for the scout. He did not come, and finally Jack hurried into the house to see what had happened. He found the scout half-way down the front stairs, clinging to the bannisters for support, fairly grinning with pain.

"It's no use!" the man gritted through his teeth. "I'm worse off than I thought. My head's spinning like a top, and I'm so stiff I can hardly move. If I'd stayed up I might have been all right, but lying down did for me. I can't drive a car any more than I can fly!"

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Jack rushed back to the road with his news. A minute later the entire household was gathered around the scout, who sat despondently on the stairs, his head between his hands. There could be no question about it; it was perfectly true that the man could not possibly drive the powerful car.

For a moment nobody spoke, then Mr. Blakesley put his hand on the scout's shoulder.

"Don't misunderstand me," he said, quietly, "but you haven't exaggerated the situation, have you?"

The man looked up and gave a hollow chuckle.

"Exaggerated!" he grunted. "Well, hardly. If the army around Pittsfield doesn't learn the enemy's real plans inside twenty-four hours it will mean the greatest disaster this country has known since Bull Run."

CHAPTER XI

MR. BLAKESLEY drew a long breath, then turned to Tom's mother and took both her hands in his.

"Nellie," he said, softly, "it's asking a great deal of you two mothers, but I don't see how you can refuse."

Mrs. Blakesley turned pale, and her hand went to her lips.

"Father!" she protested.

"I know it's hard," he said. "We thought the days when such sacrifices had to be made were past, but war is war just as it was a hundred years ago. It's your country, my dear."

"Oh, surely there are other cars in Bradley, and there are men who can go," cried Mrs. Ranney, "or some other man who can drive our car! It's impossible to send these two boys into such dangers!"

Mr. Blakesley shook his head.

"There are just two other automobiles in Bradley," he said, "and I happen to know that

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one of them is out of repair. The other is an old machine—and it's kept within a hundred yards of the spot where the Blues are encamped."

The scout looked up eagerly.

"There's no real danger for the boys, ma'am," he said. "These Blues aren't savages. They make war mighty effectively, but no invading army in history has caused less suffering to the people."

Tom remembered how the Blue officer had ordered his soldiers to hold their fire as the car rushed past them, but said nothing. His heart was hammering like mad. He was frightened. The thought of leaving his mother and grandparents and going out into the darkness was terrifying, and yet deep down under his fear there was something else, a sort of warm glow that made him sure he would go. Often before in his life he had felt some slight stirrings of that queer feeling which is called patriotism, but never before had he realized how powerful an impulse it was.

For a time the two mothers cried and shook their heads. It was asking too much, they protested. Grandmother Blakesley had said

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nothing throughout the discussion, but now she spoke.

"The summer before you were married, Nellie," she said, "I saw your husband start for Cuba, and I never expected to see him come back."

Mrs. Blakesley dried her eyes and raised her head.

"You're right, mother," she said, quietly.

The scout, wrapped in blankets and shawls, was tucked away in the back seat. The two boys, both of them with great lumps in their throats, climbed into the front seat. Tom looked back at the little group around the front door through a dancing mist. The words which both his father and grandfather had spoken flashed through his mind:

"Remember, Tom, you've got to be a man now."

He turned and waved his hand cheerily. Then Jack started the engine, and very slowly, its lamps unlighted, the engine throttled down and muffled so that it sounded faintly, the car started down the road.

Jack made no immediate effort to increase his speed, but fairly crawled through the dark

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streets, heading straight for the edge of town opposite the railroad.

Tom's heart was in his mouth. He expected Blue sentries to come bounding out from behind every tree and clump of bushes, and it seemed to him that he would never be able to draw a long breath.

They passed beyond the edge of the town, passed the cemetery, and drove perhaps a mile farther until they reached a cross-road.

"Do you think I can cross over now?" Jack asked the scout.

"Take a chance," came a muffled response from the bundle of blankets. "We've got to save time."

With the lights still unlighted, Jack did not dare attempt any speed as yet. They drove slowly over the rough and little-used road. Below them on the right sparkled the lights of the village, and a deeper glow marked the camp-fires of the Blues. Driving so slowly when all of them were longing to go at full speed was nerve-racking work, but they knew that it might be dangerous to show their lights yet.

Twenty minutes of this snail-like work brought them across to the familiar road.

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The scout felt the change from the ruts to the smooth surface of the well-metalead road.

"This it?" he demanded, and when the boys answered in the affirmative, he added, "Then light your lights and let her out."

Jack had only promised them to make twenty-five miles an hour, but the sense of relief proved too much for his caution. He switched on the electric lights, and the smooth gray surface of the road stretched temptingly before them.

The car gathered headway, the explosions of the motor merged into a steady drone. The road seemed flying out of the night to meet them. Hedges, fences, trees, and houses fairly flew past them. Tom leaned over in his seat and glanced at the speedometer. It registered a speed of forty-two miles an hour.

"See here, Jack," he protested, "there's no use taking chances. You can't hold this speed all the way, and we don't want to have to stop every few minutes to put water in the radiator."

Jack slowed up at once.

"I'd no idea I was going so fast," he confessed. "I guess I was just running away—the way we did the day before yesterday."

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They settled to a steady, space-covering speed. The car performed beautifully, and the boys were thankful that they had spent the morning overhauling the engine. Neither of them spoke or glanced at each other as they came to the top of the long hill—until a sudden thought struck Tom like a shot.

“Quick!” he called. “Turn off those lights and coast down the hill. The Blues may have another camp in that field behind the woods.”

Jack obeyed instantly. The lights snapped off, the engine fell silent, and the big car began slipping noiselessly down the hill.

And, sure enough, there was a faint red glimmer of light showing above the black curtain of trees. The Blues were still there! But unless some of them were very close to the road or the lights of the car had been seen there seemed little danger. The long hill would give them a good start, and by the time they had reached its foot their speed would be sufficient so that as soon as the engine was started they could laugh at pursuit. But, for all that, it was a ticklish situation.

Jack released the brake, and the big car

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coasted at the increased speed. They were more than half-way down the long slope when there came a sudden hoarse call from a field on one side of the road, and an instant later they heard the sound of rapid footsteps.

It was a case of trusting entirely to sheer speed. Jack started his engine (thankful for its instant response), and the machine fairly flew. Very wisely, he did not turn on the lights, for he knew that the road ahead was clear.

Before they had raced more than a hundred yards another shout sounded behind them. They could not make out the words, but there was no mistaking the tone. It was a summons to halt.

"Don't stop!" called the scout. "They never can hit us in the dark."

Unconsciously both boys bent their heads. Even as they did the wind-shield in front of them was smashed into bits and a sharp crack sounded behind them. Queer whining noises, like the singing of a telegraph wire that has been struck sharply with a stone, sounded overhead, and neither Tom nor Jack needed to be told what had caused them. For the first time in their lives they were under fire.

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"Stay with her!" the scout fairly bellowed in their ears. "They won't come as close as that again."

It seemed to Tom that every inch of the skin on his back was full of pins and that the flying car was standing still. His whole nervous system was stretched taut; his flesh fairly quivered with the expectation of a bullet. At every pop of the increasingly distant rifles and every drone of a bullet above his head he flinched. He wanted to get out of his seat and lie down at the bottom of the car, but the sight of his companion bent over the steering-wheel pricked his pride and made him keep his seat.

The popping of rifles had ceased and the three occupants of the car had made up their minds that they were clear of the danger when a sharp pop and the hiss of escaping air sounded from the rear of the car.

"A tire!" gasped Jack, wrenching at the wheel as the car skidded toward the ditch.

"We can't stop now!" Tom said, quickly. "You'll have to drive on a flat tire till we're safe."

And not until they had gone five or six miles down the road did they dare to stop

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and examine the damage. Then the lights were lighted, Tom and Jack hurried into the road, and the scout dragged himself painfully from his seat. He walked a few yards back of the car, squatted down in his blankets, lighted a short pipe, and laid his automatic pistol on his knees.

"If they come," he explained, "maybe I can hold 'em off long enough for us to get the jack out from under the car and get her started. Now hurry, boys!"

Never had a tire been so full of the very spirit of contrariness; never had tools showed such a faculty for hiding themselves under bits of waste and in the obscure corners of tool-boxes. Tom was quite sure that they had taken an hour to get the ruined tire off and that the Blues must be fairly upon them. Every instant he expected to hear the crack of a rifle or the shout of their pursuers.

"I'd help if I could," the scout told them, "but I'm not much use. I'm better off here."

Even after the new tire was in place the strain was not over, for it seemed that no amount of pumping would ever inflate it. The boys took turns at the pump, working fran-

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tically until their arms ached. Would the stubborn thing never be hard?

"Something on the road behind us!" the scout warned them, in a low tone.

There was no time to make sure that the tire was quite as hard as it should be. The boys hurled the tools into the box, tore their fingers in their haste to get the jack out from under the rear axle, and bundled the scout back into his seat. A few seconds more and the car was boring into the night.

"Guess my ears played a trick on me," admitted the scout, who was watching the road behind them. "If they had come close enough for me to hear them they'd have certainly taken a pot-shot at us. We'd have made a fine target in the glare of those lights."

And now they settled again to the steady clip. Once the engine "knocked" a bit, and Jack's face looked anxious as he bent his head to listen to the sound, but the trouble was temporary, and a minute later the motor was droning as smoothly as ever.

The road unwound steadily like a great ribbon. They rolled up and down hills, through woods that lined both sides of the road, roared over bridges, and whizzed past

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farm-houses. Nobody offered to speak. They were intent on but one thing—speed.

An hour later, as they were rushing through the dark streets of a little town, Tom broke the long silence.

"I'm sure we're on the right road," he said. "I remember this place. There's a band-stand and a fountain in the middle of a little park."

A short time afterward Jack studied the speedometer and then asked for the time.

"Half past nine," the scout told him.

"That's three hours, and we've made fifty-eight miles," Jack said. "We'd have averaged better than twenty if it hadn't been for that tire. Well, I'll make up some of that right off."

They had passed out of the village and entered another stretch of splendid road. Jack increased the speed, and the needle of the speedometer climbed to an even thirty miles an hour and stayed there.

Tom was watching the line of darkness recede steadily before the twin rays of the two search-lights, leaving always the empty, level surface of the road so clearly illuminated that Tom could easily make out sticks and stones nearly a hundred yards in front of the car.

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Suddenly he blinked, rubbed his eyes, and looked again. There in the full glare of the lights stood a line of dark figures drawn straight across the road!

Before Tom could cry out Jack had put on the brakes.

"Shall I try to turn?" he shouted. "We passed a cross-road just a bit back."

The scout rose to his feet, took one look at the figures now hurrying toward them, and dropped back into his blankets. "Trapped!" he said, shortly. "The jig's up!"

An instant later an officer and several men in the hated peaked caps had surrounded the car, and an electric flash-light was snapped in the boys' faces.

"Children!" exclaimed a voice in English.

At the same moment there was a thud and a scramble in the road behind the car. In spite of his condition the aero-scout had made a rash effort to escape, only to be easily caught before he had taken half a dozen steps.

Again the officer's flash-light winked and played over the scout's tattered uniform. Instantly he smiled with satisfaction, then turned to the boys.

"Drive the car to the side of the road and

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get out of it," he commanded. "No tricks, now!"

Tom's heart was like lead. They were prisoners! He was not thinking so much of his own plight as of the message that would never reach Pittsfield in time.

CHAPTER XII

HAD Tom Blakesley been a few years younger he would have been in terror of his life when he and his companions found themselves actually in the hands of the Blue soldiers. But Tom knew that the days when prisoners of war were actually harmed had long since passed and that non-combatants, unless found with weapons in their hands, were not likely to be molested.

In company with Jack and the scout he followed at the heels of the officer, a Blue soldier walking on either side of them, the rest bringing up the rear. They left the road, cut diagonally across a field, and came to a farmhouse. The barns and sheds were literally packed with men and horses, and twenty or more tents had been pitched in the fields beyond the house.

The three Americans were led at once into the kitchen, where three other officers sat about a long table whose surface was covered

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with a map. At the entrance of the younger officer and his prisoners they pushed back their chairs and looked up.

There was a short conversation between the Blue officers, during which Tom and his companions were left to themselves. The speech of the Blues was peculiar. Tom had the feeling that he was always just on the point of making out what they said, yet could never quite catch up with their meaning. He stood listening intently. Most of the talking was done by the oldest of the four men and the one who seemed highest in command—a red-faced, stout man with a black beard.

After a few minutes the officer who had captured them rose to his feet, beckoned to Tom and Jack, and opened a door leading into another part of the house. As they went out the door Tom saw the scout looking at him anxiously. He knew what was in the scout's mind—he feared that the two boys would tell all that they knew of the information the scout had tried to carry to Pittsfield.

The officer led them into a small, bare-furnished room and motioned them toward a couple of chairs. He unhooked his sword

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so that he could sit comfortably and dropped into a third chair, facing them. Then, in a tone so like those in which they were accustomed to being reprimanded that the effect was startling, he said abruptly:

"Well, boys, this is a pretty serious business you're in."

The speech was so different from anything that the boys had expected that they could find no answer. More than that, it frightened them somewhat. It sounded as though the officer was sorry for them, but that they had to be punished and that it was his duty to do it.

"I suppose that scout made you bring him in your machine, didn't he?" the Blue officer went on, before they had a chance to recover themselves.

This looked like a possible loophole of escape, but both boys answered, automatically, "No, sir."

The officer looked surprised. "Oh, didn't he? And I suppose you don't know that you have no business helping your own soldiers unless you really belong to the army?"

Again they found nothing to say, and again a cold fear gripped at them. The officer sat

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silent, eying the two boys sharply for so long that they began to grow uneasy. Then he told them a few of the things which were sometimes done to civilians who took part in the operations of war. The boys did not dare look at each other, but sat staring at the floor. They could hear a low mutter of voices from beyond the closed door and knew that the scout was being questioned as they were.

"Well"—the officer's voice took quite another tone all of a sudden—"I'm convinced that you boys didn't know that you were doing wrong. If I thought you did it would be a different matter. But I'm not going to treat you as I would if you were grown men. You can just answer a few questions. Now, where were you going when we stopped you?"

Tom had to snap his teeth down hard to keep from crying "Pittsfield" as loud as he could. The relief he felt at the officer's words made him want to tell everything. But something told him that this was the very thing that had been expected of him. He did not know anything about psychology. He did not know that one of the most effective methods of making a man talk is to frighten him, then suddenly relieve his fears.

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But Jack Ranney's mind had not moved quite as quickly as Tom's. His feeling of relief had done the work.

"Pittsfield!" he cried.

An instant later he could have bitten his tongue off and cried like a baby for what he had done, but it was too late. The Blue officer leaned back in his chair and grinned at them cheerfully.

"Pittsfield, eh?" he said. "I don't suppose you know why you were going, do you?"

They shook their heads.

"The scout didn't tell you why he wanted to get there? Just asked you to take him?"

The two boys looked at each other miserably.

"We aren't going to tell you anything," Tom said, at last, trying to keep his voice steady.

The officer frowned, studied the floor an instant, then launched into a perfect rattle of questions, apparently giving up trying to find out the object of the boys' mission, and gradually getting out of them the whole story of their flight from Pittsfield. Every now and then he would suddenly switch back onto the main track of his questioning, but the

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boys did not grow careless. They were ready for these sudden attacks, and at the end of half an hour the officer got out of his chair and laughed without any show of ill temper.

"You're a tight-lipped pair," he said. "Maybe what you know won't hurt us, and maybe it will. I guess to make things safe you'll have to be part of the Blue army for a few days."

He swung open the door and started to lead them into the room where the scout had been left with the other three Blue officers. But the sight that met their eyes made all three of them stop. The young officer did not leave the door open more than five seconds, but in that short space of time Tom and Jack got a clear view of the four men in the kitchen, and they knew all that had taken place as well as though they had actually witnessed it.

The American scout sat in the chair where they had left him, but he seemed to have actually grown smaller. He was slumped down in his chair, his shoulders were hunched up, he had a hand either side of his drawn face, and his face had turned a sickly gray. Two of the Blue officers stood within a few feet of him, staring down at him with an air of

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triumph. The stout man with the black beard was sitting on one corner of the kitchen table, swinging one booted leg, a cocked revolver lying across his knee, his red face thrust within a few inches of the scout's.

"You boys can sleep here," the young officer said, curtly, as he slammed shut the door. "And don't try to get away. You're in no danger now, but you'll be shot if you try to escape."

Tom and Jack had no thought of escape. They were too thoroughly frightened by the picture in the next room of which they had caught a glimpse.

"He's told!" whispered Jack, as soon as they were alone.

Tom nodded.

"Did you see his face? Wasn't it awful?" continued Jack.

"They scared it out of him," Tom said. "And he was hurt worse than we thought. That black-bearded man had a revolver in his hand. That's it—they just scared him."

From the other side of the door came a steady murmur of speech and something that sounded like groans. The two boys drew into the farthest corner of the room and made a

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sort of bed out of their overcoats and a battered couch that stood in a corner. For a time they did not speak, but lay listening to the sinister sounds from the kitchen and thinking of their own situation.

Tom realized that any attempt to escape was out of the question. The room had a single door, the one leading into the kitchen, and one window, whose shutters were closed. There was evidently a porch outside the window, for Tom could hear the footsteps of a sentry pacing back and forth.

And just to get clear of the house would not accomplish anything. The car would certainly be guarded, and they were too far from both Bradley and Pittsfield to think of making their way in either direction on foot. More than that, the country might be full of Blue troops in every direction, and to get away from their present captors might be only to fall into the hands of others.

Two thoughts kept chasing each other endlessly through Tom's tired head. First he would think of his mother, then of the message that would never reach Pittsfield and of the army that would be waiting there for the blow which would never fall.

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Thinking of these things, he fell into a restless sleep. Several times during the night he was awakened. Once or twice he heard voices and the tramp of feet on the porch outside the window, and at one time he was quite sure that he heard the purring of an automobile. But each time, before his thoughts could take definite shape, sleep would grip him again, and he would tumble back into queer dreams.

When he finally awakened the room was light and Jack was standing at the shuttered window trying to look out into the farm-yard. Jack turned as soon as he heard Tom move.

"Tom," he called out, "they're gone!"

Tom was on his feet in a second.

"Gone!" he repeated, incredulously. "Who's gone?"

"The Blues!" answered Jack. "I've been up ten or fifteen minutes, and I haven't heard a sound."

CHAPTER XIII

VERY cautiously the boys opened the door into the kitchen. The room was empty. The table was covered with a litter of torn papers, burnt matches, ashes, and the cold stumps of cigars. They went to the windows and looked out. The barns and sheds gaped open; the fields that had been white with tents the night before were nothing but stretches of bare earth. The Blues had gone, beyond question.

The boys' first thought was of the car. It was not a difficult matter to follow the path over which they had been led by their captors the night before, and easy enough to find where the car had stood and to follow its tracks for some distance down the road.

Tom and Jack stood still and looked at each other in despair. They had been longing to escape from the Blues. Here they were, scot-free, yet they found themselves almost wishing that the Blues had kept them

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prisoner. They were about as helpless as two human beings could be. They had nothing to eat, little or no money, and the vaguest knowledge of the country and the whereabouts of the forces of both armies.

"Well," Jack demanded, miserably, "what are we going to do?" Tom sat down on the top rail of a fence and considered. "Let's see," he began. "We're somewhere around sixty miles from Bradley, and we can't figure on going in either direction any way except on foot. I wish we knew where the Blues are!"

"According to what the scout told us," Jack pointed out, "there can't be very many of them anywhere in this part of the country."

"That's so," Tom agreed, "and yet everywhere we go we seem to stumble onto them. There are a few of them here, there, and everywhere. You see, Jack, it would have to be that way if they're doing the way the scout told us. By having a few of their soldiers appear at Bradley and a lot of places like that they make the Americans think they're moving on Pittsfield, and all the time they're going somewhere else."

Jack shook his head over the problem.

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"Wherever we go," he decided, "we've got to have something to eat first."

This seemed an excellent plan, and they acted on it without any delay. A walk of half a mile took them to a farm-house where a wisp of smoke rising from the chimney showed them that the inhabitants had not been driven off by the Blues.

They found a farmer's wife, a gaunt, tired-looking woman, who gave them food and showed no curiosity. She did not ask who they were or where they were going, but sat and watched them eat without speaking. Finally she told them that her husband was in the army and that she was trying to run the farm alone. A glance at her and another at the unkempt premises told only too plainly how unequal a fight she was having to wage, and the boys had their second glimpse of the most unfortunate type of war's victims.

After they had finished their meal and gone back to the road they stood trying to make up their minds which way to go. There was no use of their trying to reach the American forces near Pittsfield with what fragments they possessed of the scout's information. At best they could not reach the city

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inside four days, and that would be too late. There seemed nothing for it but to turn and tramp back to Bradley as best they could.

While they stood trying to make up their minds what to do an unexpected sound decided their course for them. Sharp and clear on the November air sounded the long-drawn hoot of a locomotive's whistle.

"A train on the railroad!" shouted Tom.

"And not very far away, either, if we hear it as plain as that!" added Jack.

They ran back to the house and inquired their way to the nearest village on the railroad.

"It's just five miles to Cold Creek," the farmer's wife told them, "and all ye have to do is follow yer noses down the main road."

Never had Tom and Jack made better time over five miles of road. The mere thought of reaching the railroad and of finding a train which would take them to either Bradley or Pittsfield was a sufficient spur to send them flying. They did not even stop to wonder how the railroad had been suddenly opened after several days of complete paralysis, but as they drew near to the village this thought began to perplex them. Tom hit on an explanation.

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"Don't you see, it's just part of the Blues' scheme," he explained. "They let the Americans open the road for a few days—or maybe only a day—then close it up again, and our army will be surer than ever that it's going to be attacked."

This explanation, poor as it was, quite satisfied them, and they hurried on down the road, certain that they would find Cold Creek either occupied by an American outpost or in communication with one or both ends of the railway line. The experiences of the past few days, however, had made the boys cautious. When they reached a low hill overlooking the village they stopped and studied the scene carefully before descending.

As they stood there they heard again the whistle of a locomotive.

"Come on, Tom," urged Jack. "If we hurry we may be in time to catch that train."

But Tom was not so eager. "Let's wait," he answered. "If there's one train there'll be another, and I sort of want to see what kind of trains they're running. We can see the road from here."

From the hill where they stood there was, indeed, an excellent view of the railroad, at

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a point where the line ran through a cut opened through wooded hills and came out into the shallow valley which held Cold Creek.

The train was now so close that they could hear distinctly the coughing of the engine and the rumble of cars.

"It's not coming from the city at all!" exclaimed Jack. "It's coming from the other direction!"

"That's right," agreed Tom, "and, what's more, it's a freight. It's going slow, and you never heard a passenger make a noise like that."

Perhaps ten minutes later the laboring engine came out of the distant cut. It was indeed going slowly, although the track sloped somewhat toward the village. Instead of the string of box-cars which the boys had expected to see there emerged from the cut flat-car after flat-car, not empty, but fairly crawling with men or crowded with bulky objects which a second glance showed to be field-guns, limbers, caissons, and big ammunition-wagons.

The train was too far away for the boys to make out the uniforms of the soldiers that were packed on the flat-cars, but they knew

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well enough that they must be American troops. Evidently the gigantic ruse which the Blues were playing was working to perfection; and the Americans, having found that they could once more utilize the railroad for carrying troops, were hurrying every available man toward Pittsfield.

Tom had jumped to his feet in great excitement. "If that train stops at Cold Creek," he said, "we can get hold of somebody and tell 'em all we know. It's probable they know already—but it can't be, either, or they wouldn't be going that way. Come on, Jack; we've no time to lose!"

They had taken two or three strides down the hill when Jack caught his companion's arm.

"Look there, back of us!" he said.

Tom turned and looked back over the road they had just traveled. Perhaps a quarter of a mile behind them, swinging along at the peculiar gait which the boys had come to know so well, came a column of Blue infantry. They must have been in plain view of the distant train, yet they paid it no attention, but tramped stolidly forward.

"They don't see the train!" Jack said.

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But the true explanation had flashed upon Tom. "Of course they see it!" he said.

"But why—" Jack commenced.

"They know what's on the train," Tom cried, "and so do I! It's loaded with Blues!"

There are times when events happen so rapidly and the mind is so confused that excitement and surprise give way to stupefaction. Tom and Jack stood gazing at each other with open mouths, as though they had suddenly lost their senses. And it was not at all strange that they felt as they did. For several days they had been trying to understand the movements of two great armies in a country where every ordinary means of communication had been destroyed and where both armies were making use of methods never before employed. And now, just as they had made up their minds that they understood quite clearly what was going on and that they alone possessed information of the greatest importance to their own forces, here were the Blues doing exactly the thing which the scout had said they would not do!

An instant the two boys stood looking at each other, then turned and ran down into

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the village as fast as their legs would carry them. They had no mind to be overtaken by the Blue force which they had seen on the road behind them.

Hardly had they entered Cold Creek when another unexpected sight met their eyes. Standing in front of a house a block or so down the wide street was the Ranneys' automobile, a Blue soldier with a pipe in his mouth sitting at the wheel, another standing on the walk beside the car.

"Turn up the walk to the next house just as though we belonged there," ordered Tom. "There may be Blues in it, but we've got to take the chance. I don't want that man with the black beard to see us."

They walked up to the next house, climbed the steps, and Tom laid his hand on the door-knob. He had a feeling that the two men by the automobile were watching him, and he could fairly feel their eyes boring into the back of his head. He was afraid that the door would be locked, but, to his joy, the knob turned easily in his hand, and the next instant the two boys were inside the strange house and the door was closed behind them.

They found themselves in a hallway. An

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open door into the living-room showed them a woman and two children, and a man, with his coat off, was striding rapidly toward them, evidently having seen them come up the walk from the street.

"What are you doing here?" he began, angrily.

Tom wasted no time, but plunged into the very heart of his story. He tried to tell everything at once, got sadly tangled, and quite lost the thread of what he was trying to say, but his earnestness was enough to convince the man.

"Come in here and sit down," he commanded; then when the boys were seated he said, "Now get your breath and tell me what it is."

Tom told him only such parts of the tale of their adventures as seemed necessary. The man did not interrupt, but nodded from time to time.

"We've heard some of that here in Cold Creek," he said, when Tom had finished. "We knew, of course, that our army has gone and that the Blues were dropping down on us from nowhere. We heard crazy stories about that battle between the airships and didn't be-

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lieve more than half of it. Now tell me again what this air-scout told you boys."

Tom repeated the tale of the great feint against Pittsfield, and the secret gathering of forces for the attack on Albany, and the great army of invasion which was to roll down the Hudson and cut off New York.

At the end of it the man shook his head hopelessly. "It's all beyond me," he said. "All I know is that business is going to be knocked in the head and that we'll have worse hard times than any of us have ever seen."

He sat for a time staring moodily at the floor. Outside the house sounded the tramp of the little column of Blue infantry marching past.

"What do you boys want to do?" demanded the man, finally. "Get back to Bradley?"

"Not if we can get to Pittsfield," answered Tom.

"Pittsfield!" repeated the man, with a chuckle. "You can't fly, and I guess there's no other way of getting there. Anyhow, that would be just running yourselves into danger. You ought to be getting back to your mothers. What makes you want to go to the city?"

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"We don't want to—" Jack began, but Tom cut in on him eagerly.

"Yes, we do, too," he said, hurriedly. "Half an hour ago I didn't think we did, but now I do."

"Why?" asked the man.

Tom hesitated. The real reason was a wild idea that had popped suddenly into his head, and he was afraid to put it into words. He was quite sure that he would only be laughed at, or worse. So he gave another reason that was a little shy of the truth.

"I think there are more Blues behind us than there are in front," he explained, "and I think it 'll be easier to go ahead than it will to go back."

"What you ought to do," the man said, decisively, "is to stay right here until things get cleared up a bit, and then get back to your folks. Boys of your age haven't any business roaming around the country at such a time. If you were my boys I'd tell you what to do in a hurry! I'll tell you what I'll do. They thought last night they might get the telephone lines fixed up, and I'll see if I can phone to Bradley. You wait till I come back."

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As soon as the man had left, and his wife had made sure that the boys were not starving and left them to themselves, Tom leaned over and whispered in Jack's ear:

"We're not going to Bradley—even if the telephone does work. We're going to Pittsfield."

"Why?"

"A lot of reasons. I don't believe we can get back on foot."

"But we'll have to go to the city the same way, and it 'll take twice as long," protested Jack.

"No, we won't," contradicted Tom. "We'll go on the train."

"Train?" repeated Jack. "What train?"

"The same one that carries the Blues," said Tom.

Jack gasped. Such a proposal was a little too much, even after what they had been through.

"They'll catch us in a minute," he objected.

"Maybe not," answered Tom. "They had us last night and let us go. They wouldn't have left us if they'd cared whether we were loose or not, would they?"

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Jack was too utterly discouraged and tired to be led into an argument.

"But I don't see why we want to go to the city, anyway," he persisted.

Tom had plenty of explanations. If what the scout had told them was true there was little danger in front of them. If it was not true (which was the wild idea that had made Tom decide on this new course), and the real attack of the Blues was to be directed against Pittsfield, it was possible that they might get through the lines in time to warn their fathers and get them out of the city before the battle actually occurred.

Jack was still both unhappy and unconvinced when the man returned from a fruitless visit to the telephone station.

"No use," he said. "Wire's as dead as a clothes-line. Guess you boys are penned up in Cold Creek for a while."

CHAPTER XIV

THAT was one thing which Tom had made up his mind not to do. The constant tension of being cut off from his family and all news of them was bad enough to endure when there was plenty of excitement to make them forget. But to have to stand it here in this village, where they knew nobody and where there would be nothing to do but think of their own unhappy situation, would be altogether too much.

After the man had left the house a second time the boys slipped out, telling the curious woman that they were going to watch the soldiers.

Once outside the house they found that losing themselves in the crowd was an easy matter. The entire population of Cold Creek seemed to have deserted occupations of every sort and gone into the streets to watch the passage of the invading army.

Tom and Jack had already seen something

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of a great army in motion. They had driven through the country roads when the hurriedly gathered forces of the American army were pouring toward Pittsfield. But they had caught only confused glimpses of things, seen from the seat of the hurrying car or in the dim light of the autumn evening. And now really for the first time they came close enough to the thing to realize its gigantic nature.

They knew too little of military matters to be able to appreciate the marvels of transport which the Blues were accomplishing—marvels which would have been quite impossible to an army even a dozen years before, and which no one in America had even faintly imagined that the Blues could accomplish.

The boys knew from what they had seen and heard that the invaders, following their naval success, had literally flown over the heads of the Americans with their huge balloons, dropped an army in the very heart of the invaded country, and then set about attacking the defenders from the rear. They did not realize what a wonderful degree of foreknowledge and perfection of organization had been necessary for such a stroke, but

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they could get some inkling of the Blue organization from the sight which lay before them.

That train whose approach they had watched from outside the village had already passed through, but another and still another had followed it, and by the time they had wriggled and elbowed their way through the crowd and come closer to the station a fourth was bearing down on the village.

"Where'd they get hold of all the cars?" Tom heard one man ask.

His companion, a man whose blue overalls stained with grease showed him to be a railroad employee, had no difficulty in explaining.

"Tumbled down out of the sky onto Fainwell Junction," he said. "Division headquarters, repair-shops, everything. All they had to do was take it. Must have been rolling-stock enough there to handle three armies like theirs."

The fourth train, drawn by three great freight-locomotives, came rumbling slowly down the long grade. It stopped in the station itself, and Blue soldiers tumbled out of the engine-cabs for orders, exactly as though

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the train had been in the hands of its regular crew. Inside the station building the telegraph key was clicking busily, and presently orders (Tom wondered where they had come from) were handed to the Blue engineers, the great moguls panted, snorted, finally jerked the long string of cars into motion and rumbled on their way.

This train was made up largely of flat-cars carrying infantry and artillery. The men squatted on the cars, huddled together in groups, their blue uniforms covered with shaggy overcoats of a dingy gray. Tom caught glimpses of guns of all sorts, and his eyes followed one car, loaded with queer-shaped, slender guns on low-wheeled carriages, until the strange weapons were out of sight.

Tom noticed that every car had been splashed with yellow paint, and crowded closer to the track to see what the ocher marks meant, only to find that the Blues had actually commenced operating the railroad just as any regular company would do, and that all the cars had been numbered and checked.

"What chance have we got against such

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people?" he heard a voice behind him saying. "They're born and trained to war the way we are to business. They've been planning this thing for years. They knew a year ago just how they'd fight and how sure they were to win. I say we'd better get out of it now before it's too late and take our medicine. We're licked before we've had a chance to start fighting. We're children in the hands of these people."

Tom felt that this was only too true. Ever since his first sight of a Blue soldier he had felt it. When he had seen the Blue balloons scatter the American aeroplanes he had been even surer that there was no hope. Yet he could not forget what his father had said: "We may be beaten at first, Tom, but we'll win in the end—sure!"

He took a long breath. After all, he would not have been a Blue! It was better to be an American and be beaten—but they were not going to be beaten!

"Every one of these trains stops at the watering-tank down beyond the village," he said suddenly to Jack. "That's where we'll have to wait."

"You're not really going?"

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"Of course we are."

Jack started to object, then shrugged his shoulders.

"All right," he said, in complete surrender.

All day, forgetting such trifles as hunger, they watched the wonderful passage of the Blue invaders. The heavily loaded, crawling trains passed at regular intervals, stopping only for orders. For the most part the huge operation moved without a hitch, but there were occasional breaks in the monotonous thunder of the trains and scurrying about of men with messages.

About two o'clock in the afternoon a balloon, much larger than any Jack and Tom had seen, hovered over the railroad-station and talked to the soldiers about the depot, first with signal-flags, then through megaphones, and for an hour or so after that there was a delay of some sort in the traffic.

Not all the troops were being carried by rail. The road over which the two boys had traveled so much—and which had seemed utterly deserted that very morning—was now choked with troops. There were great masses of infantry in the familiar blue uniforms or gray overcoats, but other and strange uni-

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forms now commenced to appear. There were light infantry in gray, with puttees and rakish slouch hats, artillerymen in lighter blue, and cavalry with yellow slashings across their blue uniforms, lances dangling across their backs, and crested, leathern helmets on their heads.

Couriers on motor-cycles kept sputtering past, several autos filled with officers streaked by, and men in dingy black uniforms without trimmings of any sort were busy on all sides stringing telegraph wires, repairing the road, mending carts, planting sign-posts with undecipherable inscriptions in the same glaring yellow paint.

With the coming of night there seemed no pause in the ceaseless activity. The trains still roared down the grade (though the intervals between them were longer), the searchlights of balloons winked and twinkled overhead, and the telegraph instrument in the station clattered incessantly.

Tom and Jack spent what little money they had at the shop of a badly scared baker, and made their way cautiously (though there was no need of caution) to the big watering-tank which stood on the edge of town.

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The night was cold and dark, and none of the townspeople was stirring about, although the invaders were everywhere. None of the Blue soldiers paid any attention to the boys as they made their way toward the watering-tank, and they crept into the dense shadows about it without being discovered.

"Now," cautioned Tom, "we don't want to make any mistake, and we may have to let the first train go by. We've got to get on a car that's loaded with guns or wagons. I don't think we can get into a box-car. They're all locked. And of course we can't get onto one of those that's loaded with soldiers."

The difficulties of this part of the adventure, however, were less than they anticipated. They had to crouch in the cold for two hours, listening to the talking of two Blue soldiers on the tank above them, before the shrieking of a distant whistle warned them of the approach of the train.

Tom had a fleeting fear that the train might not stop at the tank, but when the long black shadow of the spout swung out over their heads in the darkness he knew that this fear was groundless.

As soon as the train had stopped the two

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boys crept through the darkness, hunting for a car which might give them shelter both from the cold and from the eyes of the invaders. Finally Tom found one that seemed to contain nothing but a great pile of boxes. He swung himself up, dropped down out of sight, and an instant later Jack was lying beside him.

Men with lanterns and torches ran up and down beside the train, and one of them, evidently hunting for the painted number on the car, thrust a torch almost in the boys' faces without discovering them.

After what seemed like an interminable time they heard a creak and grind as the trough was swung back from the tender of the engine, and soon the train began to move slowly off into the blackness.

Once they were actually started on their mad journey, Tom felt some misgivings. They had passed safely through several tight places, yet here they were deliberately thrusting themselves into others. They had no idea where the train might take them or what the Blues would do with them if they were captured a second time. Tom was quite sure that they would not get off as

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easily this time, but the thought of capture did not worry him. The Blues seemed too thoroughly occupied with their gigantic task to spend any time with a couple of boys stealing a ride. It was the question of what the morning would show them and of how great a piece of folly he had been guilty in yielding to his strange inclination that really bothered him.

A year before, the mere idea of staying up all night would have struck Tom Blakesley as something highly exciting. Now there really seemed nothing strange about lying on the bumping flat-car beside the black pile of boxes and bales, listening to the clatter of wheels, the click of the rails, and the whistling of the engine, and watching the sparks fly back overhead.

Of one thing he was certain—no matter how sleepy he became and how great his fatigue might be, there must be no sleeping this night. He had no idea how far toward their goal the Blue troop-train might take them. The American forces might control the line for fifty miles beyond the city; on the other hand, they might hold it for not more than ten or fifteen. If there had been

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any fighting and the American forces had been driven in, the Blues might be able to bring up their troops by rail to within a few miles of their objective—a hitherto unheard-of feat.

"We've got to keep awake," he told Jack.

"I'll watch till I can't stand it, then I'll wake you, and you hold out as long as you can."

They followed this plan, standing watch turn and turn about. The journey was not more eventful than a trip on any slow freight might have been. The long train never reached a speed of more than ten or twelve miles an hour, and there were innumerable stops. From the sounds which marked these stops and the cautious, bumping advance of the train afterward it was evident that the track had been torn up and relaid. Apparently this swift rush of the Blues was not wholly unopposed, after all.

Tom had stood watch three times, and was beginning to feel that he would not be able to keep awake five minutes on his next trick, when Jack commenced shaking him sharply.

"I think we're going to stop," he whispered, as Tom sat up. "There's a town of some sort ahead, and—"

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But Tom was fully awake now and needed no further explanations. If the train which carried them had been making its way into the railroad-station of a great city where two or three boiler-factories were working full blast at the same time, the noise and confusion of the scene before them might have been equaled.

It seemed to be no more than a fair-sized town, but the Blues had turned it into a great city. Everywhere were puffing locomotives and long strings of empty cars. Great piles of supplies of all sorts rose into the air higher than the freight and passenger stations themselves. Gangs of the men in black uniforms were building temporary side-tracks. Forges on wheels were set up everywhere, and the glare of their fires fought with the paler light of the arc-lights and the yellow flare of torches.

Confusion seemed too mild a word to describe the scene. The enlarged railroad-yards and great spaces beyond them on all sides seemed literally jammed full of a vast crowd of men, horses, wagons, guns, and supplies. There was an incessant shouting and bawling of orders, clanging of bells, tooting of whistles,

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and roar of steam. Tom could think of nothing but the confusion which marks the early morning activities of a circus magnified a thousand times.

When he thought of all the loaded trains he had seen and the columns of men which had been pouring through Cold Creek by every available wagon-road he wondered that any human beings even tried to untangle the enormous mass of men and supplies. Yet in the midst of his wonder one thought continually beset him. He did not believe that all this vast force could have been carried in airships, however huge craft of that kind the Blues might possess.

The two boys lost no time in crawling from their hiding-place and pushing their way through the great city of soldiers which had sprung into being in that quiet town. Again and again they were stopped by Blue sentries, and it seemed for a time that they would never be able to get clear of the great army. Now their path would be barred by a great park of artillery swarming with gunners, again by a long string of wagons moving forward at a crawl. Their presence seemed to excite no surprise; even as Tom had hoped,

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the invaders were too busy to bother with a couple of boys who appeared in places where they had no business.

After an hour of walking this way and that, dodging the lightest places and those districts of the town which seemed most congested with troops, the boys were beginning to hope that they might come before long to a clear path into the open country which might make their ultimate escape possible.

Neither of them had noticed a group of Blue officers watching them with some interest, and they had no idea that their movements were being followed, until some one touched Jack on the shoulder. He turned, and found himself staring into the face of one of the helmeted cavalrymen.

CHAPTER XV

THE man evidently spoke no English, but there was no mistaking his gesture, and the boys followed him with sinking hearts toward a group of officers who stood in the light of a gasoline flare.

"You belong in this town?" one of the officers demanded.

"No," admitted Tom; then added, hastily, "We're visiting here."

"Ever been in Pittsfield?"

"Yes."

The officer, who seemed to be the only one of the group who spoke English, turned to his companions and spoke to them rapidly in the Blue tongue. There was an instant's discussion, then the officer turned to them again.

"Come on," he commanded; and the whole party set off at a rapid pace.

"Remember," Tom whispered to his companion, "they won't really do anything to

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us, and they can only take us closer to Pittsfield. This is just what we wanted."

They were led through the edge of town, across several fields closely packed with tents or with long strings of feeding horses, toward a peculiar glitter of green light that showed steadily in the sky, and were finally stopped by a sentry—a strange figure, clad from head to foot in leather, his head covered by a helmet such as football-players wear. The two boys were turned over to him, and he led them, without speaking, toward the green light.

Another instant, and they knew where they were, for in the strong glare of green they saw the outlines of several of the Blue balloons, already inflated and tugging at the ropes which held them down, while others were being inflated or having their engines and cars overhauled.

The man in the leather clothes led them straight to one of the airships that appeared ready for flight and motioned them to get into the car.

The curiosity which their first close view of one of the balloons aroused in them drowned for the time all other feelings. The bag of the airship was much larger than they had

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imagined, being fully two hundred feet in length and apparently forty or fifty feet in diameter. Instead of being merely a stout cloth envelope, it was sheathed on the outside with scales of metal which made it look like the flank of a gigantic fish.

Chains and cables of metal supported the car, and this, too, was far larger and more substantial than either of the boys had imagined. At close range it did not appear flimsy in the least. It was floored much like the deck of a vessel and had a railing all the way around it. In the forward part of the car were two machine-guns, each one provided with steel shields designed to protect the gunners, not only on all four sides, but from overhead fire as well. The central part of the car was so much clear space. The engines occupied the rear part of the car, and were so thoroughly housed between steel plates that the boys could not catch the smallest glimpse of them.

"Tom," breathed Jack, "do you suppose they're going to take us up in this thing?"

"Yes," answered Tom; "I'm afraid they are!"

He was afraid. He could have stood any-

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thing but the thought of going up in one of the airships. He had never been able to climb to high places, and his worst nightmares had been dreams of swinging on a great pendulum across a tremendous gulf. It did not seem to him that he could endure it; he thought that his heart would stop beating and that he would not be able to breathe.

They were not left long in suspense. A group of the leather-clad figures came trotting across the field and clambered into the car. They glanced casually at the two boys, then paid them no more attention, but busied themselves about the car. Some began tinkering with the machine-guns forward, others disappeared into the steel cage which hid the engines, and still others commenced casting off the ropes which anchored the balloon.

Tom had to bite his lips to keep himself from crying aloud to the leather-covered men for mercy. His whole being was in revolt; the bare idea of the dizzy heights terrified him as none of the dangers through which he had passed had done.

He gave one look at Jack. Balloons held no terrors for *him*. It had always been Jack who dared climb higher than any of the other

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boys; Jack who could walk along the edge of the railroad bridge, and who had always wanted to make a kite big enough to pull him clear off the ground. And now, his fears quite forgotten, Jack was watching the strange preparations with the liveliest interest.

"If he can keep his nerve," Tom vowed, trying to make his teeth stop chattering, "I won't lose mine."

There came a sputter and whir from the powerful engines. The car did not vibrate at all, and for an instant Tom did not realize that the great bulk was actually rising, until he glanced over the railing and saw the blur of green light dropping steadily away from him.

He caught his breath; a feeling of nausea and dizziness assailed him, and he leaned back weakly against the railing. It seemed to him that he would never be able to open his eyes, but once he had done so he found that it was not so bad. The darkness prevented his realizing the great space which yawned beneath the airship, and within a few minutes he forced himself to peer over the rail.

This time when he caught his breath it

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was from wonder, and not from fear. It seemed as though the whole world was spread out like a great map beneath him. The town where the Blues were detrainning (Tom had not even learned its name) was a sparkling mass of many colored lights. And in all directions glittered and twinkled other lights, near and far, some moving about, others stationary.

Now the search-light of the airship was opened, and the great white beam began searching the face of the country, picking out now a bare field, now a patch of woodland, again a lonely farm-house.

There's another airship coming toward us," whispered Jack. "I've heard it for two or three minutes."

Another search-light winked out from the balloon and two red and green side-lights were snapped on. And now Tom's ear caught the sound of beating engines. Something in the mere sound startled him. There was about it a suggestion of enormous size and power.

"I believe it's one of their big ones!" he muttered in Jack's ear.

Nearer and nearer sounded the pulsing

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engines, and a great, deep-voiced siren howled through the still night air. Tom was trembling violently; he wanted to see this great monster of the air, and yet he dreaded the sight.

The search-lights of the balloon flicked up from the earth and bored straight through the air in front of them. Tom clutched the rail and gasped. He caught a vague glimpse of a thing whose dimensions staggered belief. He could no longer doubt that the Blue army had been transported in airships with all their train and stores.

A gas-bag which would have dwarfed the largest of the Zeppelins, with two smaller bags at each end; a monstrous, three-decked car which looked like nothing but an ocean liner; huge, slow-moving propellers — the whole great mass sliding through the night in absolute darkness!

Now Tom understood many things which had been beyond his comprehension. He had wondered why no one had seen any of these giants; now it was clear that they moved only at night. Evidently they were not capable of defending themselves like the scouting balloons, and the Blues did not dare run the risk of having them fired upon.

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Tom turned to speak to his companion, but before he could do so one of the leather-clad figures came stalking across the open deck and stood before them. A hooded electric light was snapped on, and the boys found themselves looking up at a big blue-eyed man with a kindly face and a great yellow beard that swept down over his leather jacket.

"I'm sorry for you, boys," he said, abruptly, speaking in the same precise English used by all the Blues who spoke the tongue at all. "I don't like to ask you to do what you'll have to do. I've a couple of boys at home much your age. But if you don't do it somebody else will. There's no use fighting against it. War makes that sort of demands, you know.

"By morning we shall be over the positions of your army. We know a good deal about them already. We can sail to Pittsfield in the night as easily as your aeroplanes can. But there are points about the city that we want explained—and when we come there you boys will have to do it. Of course you can refuse, but it won't gain anything. We can easily get hold of somebody who will tell us. You won't be turning traitor to your

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country. It's hard to realize, I suppose, but you're utterly beaten, and what you try to keep back from us won't make a particle of difference. It's hard on young fellows like you, but it's war. Now think it over."

He turned away and left them. The boys sat for a time thinking hard. If the big man had attempted to bully them it would have seemed different. But he had made everything so simple; it really did appear that it didn't matter whether they told or the telling was left to somebody else. And yet—!

"What 'll we do?" Jack demanded, in a low tone.

"We won't tell him a thing!" answered Tom, his mind made up.

"That's what I thought," Jack said. "Maybe somebody will have to do it, but I *don't* want to be the one."

It seemed strange to watch the dawn come, way up there in the sky. It began to turn gray in the east, the stars grew dimmer, the earth became something more tangible than a black bowl of darkness beneath them. The white glare that marked the position of the city grew larger and clearer.

The yellow-bearded officer came to them

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a second time. It was now light enough for them to make out his features quite clearly.

"Well?" he demanded.

"We aren't going to tell you anything," Tom said.

The officer nodded slowly, as though this was exactly what he had expected to hear.

"I thought you wouldn't," he admitted. "I don't think my boys at home would have told, either. I said last night that you two weren't the kind we needed. Well, no matter!"

He made a gesture with his big arm and turned away.

Tom and Jack were staring down into the grayness beneath the balloon. All feeling of giddiness and insecurity had passed; Tom had come to feel quite as secure in the balloon as he would have in a boat or an automobile.

He expected as the light grew brighter that he would be able to make out quite clearly the positions of the American forces. He knew that there must be a great army right under him, yet he could see almost nothing. Here and there on the plain was a little city of tents, but that seemed all. He did not

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realize that modern warfare consists largely in keeping yourself hidden from your foe, and that the glasses of the Blue officers were picking out hidden batteries, long lines of intrenchments and field fortifications that he did not see at all.

Pittsfield, viewed from above, was not the Pittsfield Tom had known. Only the familiar outlines of certain towers, spires, and high buildings told him that it was actually his native city.

Now, as the gray of dawn gave place to the clearer light of day, he could make out more details of the country below them, and he could see that the face of it had indeed changed. What he had thought at first were roads and fences became great, intricate systems of rifle-pits and trenches. The whole city seemed surrounded with them, and the country, instead of being empty, as had at first appeared, was literally swarming with scurrying brown dots.

Presently there was a great popping of rifles beneath them, and the prow of the balloon was lifted slightly.

"You needn't mind the firing," the big officer was kind enough to tell them. "Your people can't possibly hit us."

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In whichever direction the Blue airship cruised, the ground beneath it suddenly swarmed with life, and they were constantly under fire, sometimes only from the rifles of the infantry, at other times from the guns of concealed batteries. Some of these batteries fired shells which left a trail of smoke behind them, so that the gunners could correct their aim, but for all this the airship moved along unharmed. Occasionally they heard the drone of bullet or shell, but for the most part the missiles did not come anywhere near them.

A few aeroplanes circled up into the air from different parts of the city, but the only attention which the Blues paid to them was to send men to the two machine-guns forward. The rest of the crew, officers and men alike, were busy with glasses and sketch-books, drafting rough plans of the American defenses.

A feeling of impotent anger had gripped the two boys. Here they were forced to watch the Blues making their preparations for a successful attack upon Pittsfield, yet unable to do a single thing to prevent it! Not only that, but they had to watch the helplessness

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of the American army to defend itself from the reconnaissances of the Blue balloons. Tom and Jack had seen how incapable the aeroplanes were of fighting the dirigibles on anything like even terms, and now they were witnessing the helplessness of the land forces. The Blues were as safe here as they would have been in their own camps fifty miles away.

A sudden commotion on the forward deck made the boys withdraw their attention from the city beneath them. A little knot of the Blues stood by the machine-guns gesticulating fiercely and talking rapidly.

Straight ahead of the balloon, at a distance of perhaps two miles, a perfect swarm of small aeroplanes had shot into the air as a swarm of doves fly out of a church-tower. But instead of scattering in every direction, as all the other American air-craft which they had seen had done, these aeroplanes turned toward the Blue craft, flying at a much lower level, and came swiftly toward it.

CHAPTER XVI

SKETCHING-implements and binoculars were dropped, and the Blues prepared for battle. But instead of attacking, the American airships went shooting past beneath the dirigible, and the boys could look down and see the pink faces of the aviators as they turned to look up at their foe.

Then up from a field west of the city shot a shape which caused the sudden flight of small craft to be instantly forgotten. It was an aeroplane, but it differed as much from the others as the great troop-ship which the boys had dimly seen in the darkness had from the dirigible in which they were now riding.

Not only was it infinitely larger than all the other American air-craft, but it had an appearance of greater strength and solidity. It looked more like a fighting-machine, more, Tom thought, like the imaginary pictures which had appeared in the papers years before.

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It had single planes like a monoplane, but they were much broader and seemed to be made of something more solid than the usual canvas and metal wings. The body of the car, instead of being open, was entirely inclosed, and there was a double row of black spots along the side which looked like port-holes.

Hitherto the Blue dirigible had traveled rather slowly and had done little rising or swooping, maintaining the same level during most of the trip, and it was undoubtedly this fact which had enabled the boys to escape any discomforts and to imagine they had already become accustomed to aerial travel.

No sooner had the Blues sighted this new and terrifying foe than the engines ceased beating smoothly and burst into a clattering, sputtering roar. The airship rose at a speed that made Tom feel as he had on the occasion of his first descent in a fast elevator.

He gripped the metal rail and tried to get his breath, but no sooner had the ship rushed up to a higher level than it changed its course and dropped with a wild swoop that was worse than the most awful tumbles of his familiar nightmares. He slid to the deck,

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rolled over on his face, and closed his eyes. There was no time for mere terror; a blind, numbing horror made him at once incapable of thought and motion. He could only lie on the smooth deck and wait for the next awful plunge.

Men ran past him, and somebody, in no gentle fashion, shoved him out of the way and over against the bulwark of the car. Tom lay inert where he had fallen, listening to the cries of the Blues, which sounded shrilly above the clamor of the racing engines.

A ripping string of explosions from the front of the vessel made him think at first that the gas-bag had exploded. He had never before been close to a machine-gun in action. He raised his head slightly and opened his eyes.

The two machine-guns were spitting away furiously. Two men stood crouching under the steel hoods at each gun, one operating a crank, the other watching the swift feeding into the gun of a long belt of webbing full of cartridges. Behind the guns other leather-covered figures were tearing open blue boxes of ammunition.

Again and again the dirigible changed its course with sudden jerks and swoops that

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seemed to Tom as though they would tear him apart. Now they climbed up, up, up until they plunged into shreds and streamers of mist that Tom knew were clouds; again they shot down long, invisible slides that promised to end only when they crashed to the earth. At times the craft would run into an "air-pocket," drop, twist, plunge, roll over onto its side, and right itself with a sickening wrench that made the car sway dizzily and the steel cables and chains give out ominous creaks and groans.

From the first moment of its appearance Tom had not seen the huge aeroplane. He had been too horror-struck and sick to raise his head from the floor, and on those few occasions when he had opened his eyes he had seen nothing but the deck of the dirigible and great patches of blue sky. He would have thought that the aeroplane had been destroyed but for the fact that the two machine-guns had never ceased firing.

But now, although his terror had by no means lessened, his physical discomfort had decreased, and he was able by an effort to draw himself still closer to the rail and rise to his hands and knees.

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Just as he did so the dirigible veered off to the left, and a great, roaring, whirring mass of black metal and glittering brass rushed past, so close that the wind of its passage caused the Blue craft to heel over, and Tom caught a glimpse of slender guns sticking out of ports in a black wall, great glittering planes, and three flashing propellers. He even caught a howling voice above a confused shouting and made out the words:

“Turn this time—”

As a shipwrecked man clinging to a piece of wreckage might watch the awful play of the waves, so Tom looked out at this duel of airships. Once he had seen the Blue dirigibles drive their frailer foes this way and that, smashing them with the fire of their guns, scattering them like dead leaves. Now the tables were completely turned. The dirigibles were utterly helpless in the hands of this roaring giant of the air. They could neither strike it nor evade it, neither fight nor flee.

Did the Blues attempt to escape by heading for the upper air, the American craft, traveling at a speed never before dreamed of, swept past them and threatened them from

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above. Did they seek to swoop down, the great aeroplane slid under them. Yet not once had the guns of the American craft spoken. It was playing with the Blue balloon as a terrier might play with a rat, driving it this way and that at its pleasure, fairly laughing at the futile crashing of its machine-guns, harrying it here and there while the great city and the army which surrounded it watched the awful spectacle.

How long the horrible chase continued Tom never knew. He could see that the Blue craft had been driven far to one side of the city and that the Blues, fully realizing their helplessness, were continually dropping closer and closer to the earth, and making one attempt after another to elude their foe by taking quick turns and then dodging past beneath him. They could actually turn as quickly as their foe, but these tricks gained them nothing, for the greater speed of the American airship turned these temporary advantages to nothing.

They had descended until they were only a few hundred feet above the ground when the aeroplane opened fire. Whether the Americans were better trained or their guns bet-

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ter adapted to this style of fighting, certain it was that their fire took almost immediate effect. One shell tore through a section of the gas-bag, and the air was full of a sickening odor and a cloud of bluish vapor.

Frantically the Blues worked to save themselves. They hurled everything movable over the rails to lighten the dirigible, and canvas planes operated by ropes and pulleys were thrust out, assisting the crippled craft to glide slowly toward the ground.

Relentlessly the huge aeroplane circled about its helpless foe, its guns flashing. The small, powerful shells exploded everywhere. The metal-scaled bag above the car was fairly riddled, the car itself had been struck in several places. One shell had bored through the light metal rail above Tom's head. Only the gliding-planes which had been thrust out prevented the craft from crashing down headlong, and these could not last much longer against the deadly fire of the slim guns protruding from the black car of the aeroplane.

With some vague idea of jumping, Tom staggered to his feet. He saw trees and ground rushing up toward them, saw the pursuing bulk of the aeroplane, Jack crawling



RELENTLESSLY THE HUGE AEROPLANE CIRCLED ABOUT ITS HELPLESS FOE, ITS GUNS FLASHING

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forward on his hands and knees, the leathern figures of the Blues rushing frantically about the ruined car, the riddled gas-bag crackling and flapping above them.

The ground leaped suddenly up to meet them; he heard a confused shouting, saw the yellow-bearded officer who had talked to them throw up his arms and go backward over the railing; then came a crash, a terrific shock—and darkness.

CHAPTER XVII

"THERE, the other one's beginning to come round now!"

The voice seemed to reach Tom from some great distance. He tried to remember where he was and what had happened, but gave up the effort and let his eyes close again. When he opened them next time his brain was clearer, and he found himself looking up at a circle of brown figures. Tanned, bearded faces were staring down at him.

"Well, young man, how do you feel?" demanded a stocky man with spectacles.

Tom moved slightly and felt of himself.

"All right, I guess," he said, unsteadily. "Where's Jack?"

"Running around somewhere as spry as a kitten," answered the spectacled man. "You got all the worst of the bumping. Come, let's see what the damage is. Can you get up?"

Tom sat up. His head felt rather queer,

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and things had a tendency to go round in circles, but after he had sat leaning against the doctor's arm for a few minutes he was able to get to his feet.

The doctor stood looking at him, rubbing his chin reflectively.

"Remarkable!" he ejaculated. "Eight of you there were in that balloon, and you came tumbling down from I don't know how far up, and not one of you really hurt! We've not only learned to fly; we've learned to fall."

A few yards away from them lay the wreck of the Blue dirigible, surrounded by a knot of soldiers. The great aeroplane which had destroyed it was not to be seen. The survivors of the Blue crew were standing in a disconsolate group at one side, looking from their captors to the tangled remains of their airship.

It was no wonder that they looked utterly discouraged. It was the first complete Blue defeat which had occurred since the beginning of the war.

"Where are we?" Tom asked, as soon as he had taken a few steps and found that, save for a severe shaking up, he was quite unhurt.

"Five or six miles outside the city, between

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the third and fourth lines of defense," the good-natured surgeon told him. "But you'd better save your breath. You'll have a lot of officers pumping questions at you before long."

Jack came squirming through the crowd about the ruined dirigible. There was a strip of plaster across the bridge of his nose and a black patch under one eye, but he seemed otherwise unhurt.

"Gee! I was scared!" he exclaimed, on seeing his companion. "I thought you were done for, sure. You were awful white, and you didn't move or answer when I tried to shake you."

"What happened, anyhow?" Tom asked.

"The balloon came down on a long slant," explained Jack. "If she'd ever hit square, for all those canvas things they'd stuck out, it would have knocked us to bits. But it just sort of slid along until it hit something, and then flattened out and stopped. Most of the Blues jumped, and so did I. Then I couldn't find you, and I went back."

Tom hoped for another chance to speak to the yellow-bearded officer, but a moment afterward he and Jack, along with the surgeon

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and two or three other officers, were bundled into a big gray automobile and went whizzing off down the road. They passed through two or three big camps, a number of batteries of heavy guns squatting in deep emplacements, and finally drew up before a farmhouse above which fluttered a headquarters flag.

For more than an hour afterward they sat and told the entire story of their adventures to an intent circle of American officers. Most of what the boys had to relate was already well known to the American forces. They knew only too well the details of the battle in the clouds, and they had known for days (the aeroplanes having done considerable scouting in spite of the Blue dirigibles) that a great concentration was going on somewhere north of Pittsfield and that the railroad was being used to hurry it forward.

But the story of the wandering aero-scout and his tale of the great attack that was being planned against Albany and New York City seemed to astonish them. The boys were asked to repeat this part of their story again and again, and the circle of officers shook their heads over it.

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Tom and Jack listened with eager interest to the discussion which followed.

"Of course the thing's plausible enough," one of the older officers said. "A week ago they could have done it, gentlemen—done it without our ever knowing what was on foot. I think such an attack would have been doomed to failure, but it could certainly have been commenced without our knowledge.

"But how one of our aero-scouts could have got hold of what seems to have been pretty definite information, and yet this great concentration south' of Bradley gone on just as we had been led to expect—well, it's queer. I suppose"—turning to a tall man at his side—"I suppose there are only too many of the aero-scouts unaccounted for to enable you to identify this particular man?"

The tall officer nodded. "Unfortunately, yes," he answered.

A gray-haired man who had remained slouched down in his chair and had not spoken at all roused himself.

"It is obviously only a clever bit of the general scheme of confusion which our friends the enemy have followed," he announced. "They have made every effort to cripple our

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communications and to make us uncertain not only of their own movements, but of those of the different parts of our own army. Thanks to what has happened to-day, we can look for an end of such things and the beginning of hostilities of a saner sort."

Some time later, when the two boys had been warmly thanked for their information and the door had been closed after them on a formal council of war, the jovial surgeon came into the room and winked at them in a friendly fashion.

"I don't suppose you boys would care anything about having a machine take you into the city, would you?" he asked.

Their delighted grins were a sufficient answer.

"You two have told us a few things we might have been a valuable few days finding out," he said, "and I guess this will just pay you up a little."

Ten minutes later they had stepped into another of the huge gray military autos and were being whirled through the inner lines toward the city.

Both the boys used their eyes for a time without speaking. When they had watched

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the swarming army of the Blues the night before it had seemed that nothing could possibly check their advance, but now that they saw for the first time the enormous preparations for defense that had been made in the few days which had elapsed since their exciting ride from the city, they were not so sure of the enemy's invincibility.

Although Pittsfield was an "open town"—a city without permanent fortifications of any sort—it had been prepared for little less than a siege. It had no natural defenses, but the foe which broke through the lines of field-works with which it had been encircled faced a gigantic task.

Finally Tom put into speech a question that had been perplexing him ever since he recovered consciousness.

"Why can't that big aeroplane just about wipe out the whole Blue army?" he asked the doctor.

The latter chuckled.

"Probably that question will be asked and answered a million times before night," he replied. "That fight in which you boys had such a strange part this morning has gone a long way toward ending this war—but it

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hasn't done everything. We've got the control of the air from now on — unless they possess still more powerful airships of some sort, but control of the air doesn't mean quite all that the experts thought it would a few years ago.

"As you saw this morning, a balloon or an aeroplane can get up in the air where nothing but lucky shots from our high-angle guns can reach them, and where they're practically safe. But they can't hit back as hard as people thought they'd be able to. They can't carry guns heavy enough to do much damage to things on the ground under them, they can't shoot very straight with the guns they do carry, and they can do little or nothing with bombs and hand-grenades.

"The airships have revolutionized scouting, you see, and they may have a big effect on naval engagements, but the actual fighting of battles on land will be pretty much what it has been."

They had by this time reached the outskirts of the city, and Tom and Jack had forgotten for a few minutes that there was such a thing as war. They were coming home! It seemed as though they had been away from

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Pittsfield for years, and never had the city looked so good to them. Even the dingy lines of wooden houses and grimy brick buildings of the factory district seemed like old friends, and when they came finally into the heart of the business section they wanted to stand up in the car and shout.

Evidently, Pittsfield had recovered from the first two or three days of panic and had fallen back upon its ordinary ways of life, for the streets were full of the usual traffic, the sidewalks covered with the same crowd of hurrying figures, and everything was quite as it had been on that afternoon before the first Blue soldier appeared so unexpectedly, sitting his tired horse in front of the Blakesleys' horse-block. There were a good many brown uniforms to be seen on the streets, but that was the only difference.

Mr. Blakesley was out of his office door almost before the great gray car had stopped at the curb, and had his son by the shoulders before he could get out of the car.

"Where's your mother?" he demanded.

"She's all right," gasped Tom, as he tumbled out of the car, and the army doctor's voice called over his shoulder:

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"After that young man tells you what he's been through, sir, I guess you won't worry about his being able to take care of his mother."

Mr. Blakesley stood holding onto Tom's shoulders while the big auto whirled off toward Mr. Ranney's place of business, and staring hard at his son's face. "Tom," he said, soberly, "you've grown up."

But Tom did his best to disprove this. He had expected to plunge at once into the story of his experiences; instead he drew a long breath, took a tighter grip of his father's hand, and exclaimed heartily, "Oh, I'm glad to get home!"

They went across the sidewalk, through the outer offices (where Tom had to stop to exchange greetings with all the clerks and bookkeepers in sight), and into Mr. Blakesley's inner office. Tom told his story while Mr. Blakesley puffed steadily at his cigar, then the positions were reversed and Tom listened while his father told of what had happened in Pittsfield during the past few days.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I was about two days before the panic wore itself out," he said. "For forty-eight hours the people of this city just about went crazy. When they found that none of the railroad or interurban lines could carry them they lost their heads. It looked pretty bad for those two days, and I was glad you and your mother were out of it.

"Then the troops began to pour in from every direction, the Blues didn't come, and the people regained their senses. But it's been a queer sort of a life for all that. Streets full of soldiers, communication with the outside world cut off until yesterday morning, nothing but local news in the papers for nearly a week, and prices sky-high for fear of a siege. That's not much of a story alongside of yours, is it, son?"

Tom admitted that it wasn't, but the appearance of his father's face told him that the days which had passed had been by no means

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as quiet and free from excitement as Mr. Blakesley pretended.

Mr. Blakesley had to go out into the outer offices on business, and Tom picked up a Chicago newspaper, the first one of any sort he had seen for days. Eagerly he pounced on the solid columns under the black headlines. The despatches were contradictory and uncertain enough, but Tom had learned enough in his rapid-fire run of experiences to make something of them.

The northern army of the Blues had established a great base of supplies on the coast of Maine (as Tom already knew), and it was from here that the great balloon invasion had been launched. The American fleet was preparing for an attack upon this Blue base, and reports of a great naval battle were expected hourly.

Apparently similar tactics had been followed by the southern army of invasion, but the cutting of communications had been even more complete, and it was a matter of guesswork where the second Blue army was. Some of the despatches stated that the southern invasion was being made without the aid of the great aerial transports, and others denied this.

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Tom put down the paper and stared out the window into the busy street. All at once he felt strangely sorry that he and Jack had got through the lines and reached the city. Of course, it was all very fine to be safe at home, but Tom felt that he had suddenly dropped out everything, and that not to be close to the great march of events he had been watching for days would be somehow flat and uninteresting.

He did not realize that as yet he had seen only the flashy side of war, the swift march of great armies, the splendid rush of gigantic preparations. Even the fights in the air had been so wild and strange that they had not made him realize the real nature of the struggle. Hitherto he had seen only the armed forces, and these not yet in actual contact; he had yet to witness the effect of war upon non-combatants.

When Mr. Blakesley came back into the inner office Tom was still reading the newspaper reports.

"How will it seem to go back to school tomorrow?" demanded Mr. Blakesley.

Tom looked up. School! He had almost forgotten that such a thing existed. Latin

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and algebra and history and such stupid matters after all he had gone through!

"Not very good," he admitted, glumly.

Mr. Blakesley laughed. "I'll bet it won't!" he chuckled. "Well, it just happens that you won't have to do it—not right off, anyway. You've been to Warehouse No. 5, haven't you?"

"Lots of times," answered Tom, calling to mind the hours he had spent with Jack and other boys climbing over the bales and prowling around the dark corners of the big building.

"Beginning to-morrow," explained Mr. Blakesley, "we're going to commence transferring a lot of goods from No. 5 to No. 4. It may be that we're going to a lot of useless expense, but it pays to be careful. For my own part, I don't believe the Blues will get within ten miles of Pittsfield, and I don't think that a single building will be hit by one of their shells. But if they should get in, and there should be fighting in the outskirts of the city, Warehouse No. 5 would be right in the way of it, and there's a lot of perishable stuff in it that would burn like so much kindling.

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"I want you and Jack to go out there tomorrow and help Mr. Peterson keep track of the goods that are carted across. That better than going to school?"

"Yes, sir," Tom said, eagerly.

So, bright and early the next morning Tom and Jack, in company with Mr. Peterson, a clerk who had been in the employ of Blakesley & Co. for years, boarded a street-car and rode out to the big warehouse.

Tom had almost forgotten what a huge building it was. As soon as he saw it he realized that the job of emptying it was going to take more than a single day.

All day long they helped Mr. Peterson check the loads of the creaking drays, and when they reached home that night both the boys were thoroughly tired and wholly sick of their job. It had been good fun for the first couple of hours, but after this it became monotonous enough. The incessant banging of bales and boxes, the clatter of trucks, the droning voice of Mr. Peterson as he called off letters and numbers, and the endless setting down of these same letters and numbers in columns on long sheets of yellow paper were a long way from exciting.

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"No," Mr. Blakesley said that night, when Tom confessed that the day's work hadn't been as much fun as he had expected—"no, I don't suppose it is very exciting for a couple of boys who've been playing tag with the Blue army, riding in airships, and doing all sorts of strange things. But we're short-handed at the office, and what you boys have done to-day has been a great help.

"You remember those men in black uniforms you saw at Cold Creek working so hard? The sort of work you and Jack have been doing to-day is the sort of work they have to do every day, and that's what makes the Blue army the splendid fighting-machine it is. It isn't the soldiers, Tom; it's the men who do the hard work that makes an army win battles."

So Tom worked through the next long, weary day, trying to keep in mind what his father had told him. But it was a dreary enough work, for all that, and it seemed to him that the half-past-five whistle on the foundry next the warehouse would never blow.

"We're getting along famously," Mr. Peterson said, as he put away his bottle of red ink

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and wiped his pen. "We'll have this place empty in three days more."

Three days more! Tom groaned inwardly. It would have been vastly more interesting to have gone back to school.

The trolley-car had not carried them many blocks toward the city when Tom noticed that there were an unusual number of people in the streets and that everybody seemed much excited, while newspapers were in great demand.

"Something must have happened," Mr. Peterson remarked, looking out of the car window. "I shouldn't be surprised if there had been a battle."

Tom could hardly wait until they got hold of a paper. Mr. Peterson bought one of the first ragged newsboy who jumped onto the step of the car, and the three of them put their heads close together over the page, still damp from the press.

"Great American Victory!" The flaring black head-line fairly shouted into their faces, and the boys could not restrain a cry of delight. Then they and several other passengers who had crowded about them had to wait while Mr. Peterson folded the paper

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over his knee, hunted through every pocket for his steel-rimmed spectacles, hooked them very deliberately on his nose, and began to read.

It was a tale that was filling the streets of every city in the United States with shouting, singing, wildly excited crowds of men and women.

The great naval engagement off the coast of Maine had taken place that same morning, and the result had been a victory for the American fleet far exceeding in completeness the wildest hopes. The Blue war-ships had been battered, sunk, scattered to the four winds. No fewer than eight of them had been driven onto the rocky coast or sent down under the gray waves of the Atlantic. Even now the American vessels were battering away at the land batteries with which the Blues had further protected their great base of supplies, and tidings of a still more complete triumph might be expected at any time.

By the time the car reached the center of the city its progress was completely blocked. The streets were packed from curb to curb by the biggest crowd the boys

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had ever seen in their lives. All the street-car lines were stalled, and autos and vehicles of every sort were jammed hopelessly wherever the crowd happened to catch them.

It was no easy matter for Tom and Jack to elbow their way through the mass of excited humanity and set off for home. Once free of the thickest of the crowd, they set off at a run, whooping and shouting as they went.

Tom's father was waiting for him on the steps, a still later extra edition in his hands.

"Have they captured the land forts?" Tom shouted, as he hurried up the walk.

Mr. Blakesley nodded, smiling. "Not two hours ago," he said.

They ate supper with the paper spread out on the table between them.

"That's the biggest battle that's occurred on the sea in your time or mine, Tom," Mr. Blakesley said. "It's a great victory—a great victory. I don't suppose you know just what it means, do you?"

Tom frowned as he tried to think it out. "Why," he exclaimed, "the Blues haven't any place to go to, have they?"

"That's it exactly," his father said. "Their

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base of supplies has been destroyed. It's just as though every grocery store and bakery and restaurant here in Pittsfield were burned and all the railways stopped running. The Blue army will have to live off the country. It's hundreds of miles from the nearest sea-coast, and the fleet that might have helped it has been wiped out. There are thousands of miles and hundreds of thousands of our soldiers between the two Blue armies. They can't possibly unite.

"I'm not much of a student, Tom, but I think there's only been one other situation like this in the history of the world. You've read about it in your school-books. When Hannibal was cut off from Carthage and made war in Italy, he was in much the same situation that the Blue army is in now. Let's hope that the Blues have no such general as Hannibal to lead them!"

But, exciting as the news of that day had been, the next day's papers flooded the streets with rumors of a still more exhilarating sort.

Early in the morning there were meager reports of a third battle in the air somewhere north of the city. The huge crowds (many of them had been in the streets all night)

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fairly besieged the offices of the newspapers, and men with megaphones appeared at the windows and shouted the tidings down into the streets as fast as they were ticked off the hot wires.

At first it was known only that the great American aeroplane had engaged the Blue airships a second time—this time with the Blues instead of the Americans for spectators.

So much Tom and Jack learned on their way to work, and they passed the morning in a perfect fever of expectancy. They were of so little use to Mr. Peterson that he would have remarked upon it had he not been nearly as excited as they were.

They had to depend upon the truck-drivers for their news, and these men brought in the unwelcome report that something had happened to the only telegraph line to the north which was working, and that not a scrap of information had come in for hours. It was thought on the streets that this might mean a Blue victory.

Mr. Peterson did not wait for the twelve-o'clock whistles to stop work.

"I guess we'll go up to the city for lunch, boys," he said, with a rather guilty smile.

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They rode up on a truck jammed full of the handlers from the warehouse, the street-cars being still entirely off their schedules owing to the great jam in the heart of the city.

When the truck could no longer go forward the men piled off and went ahead on foot, although they were still half a mile from the outermost of the newspaper offices.

There were times when it seemed to Tom that he had struck a solid wall of humanity and could not get forward another inch. For some time he and Jack managed to keep track of Mr. Peterson, but presently they lost him, and not long after that the two of them were separated by the clanging passage of a patrol-wagon.

It was nearly one o'clock when Tom found himself part of a great crowd in front of the *Mercury* office. The *Mercury* was a little, unimportant paper to which nobody paid any attention under ordinary circumstances, but to-day it was as mighty an organ as any of the more powerful papers of the city.

Tom managed to reach the base of a telegraph-pole, and wedged himself against it in such fashion that the incessant pushing and

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jostling of the crowd could not move him. From where he stood he could look in one of the open windows on the second floor of the *Mercury* building. Men in their shirt-sleeves were running about incessantly, and whenever one of them came near the window the steady roar of the crowd grew less and everybody held his breath for the announcement.

CHAPTER XIX

ALL at once a wild shouting and yelling came out through the open window, and Tom could see the coatless men inside dancing around like so many Indians.

Instantly the great crowd burst into a roar like nothing that Tom had ever heard in his life. It seemed that the volume of it must bring the great buildings tumbling down on people's heads.

A man with a megaphone in his hand came to the window and tried to quiet the great throng, but it was several minutes before he could make himself heard. It did not seem possible that so many people could keep so still, but it finally became so quiet that Tom could actually hear the clicking of the telegraph instrument inside the newspaper office. Then the man at the window raised the megaphone to his lips and began to speak.

"The American aeroplane Dreadnought which destroyed a Blue dirigible day before

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yesterday," he began, "landed at Rockover, just outside the American lines, at half past eleven this morning. The machine is a total wreck, and only two members of her crew of twenty-six were able to give an account of what had happened. The aeroplane will never be able to make another ascent."

He paused and adjusted the rattling sheet of yellow paper in his hand. It was as still in the street as though the great crowd had been made up of so many wax figures.

"According to the story told by the survivors of the Dreadnought's crew," the man in the window went on, "the entire air-fleet of the Blue army has been destroyed."

What the rest of that first message was Tom was not to know for hours. The great crowd went suddenly mad. Men threw their hats in the air, grabbed one another, and danced about wildly. Tom saw men laughing while tears streamed down their faces. The reporter in the window was still trying to talk, but he might as well have shouted against the roar of a storm at sea.

Tom made no effort to get back to the warehouse, but fought his way as best he could to his father's office. It was two

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o'clock when he reached it, and he found that all business had been suspended while everybody read the papers.

Details were still lacking, but it was definitely known that not only the Blue fighting-balloons, but a great number of the huge transports, had been destroyed, and that the American aeroplane had finally been wrecked, not by the Blue air-craft, but by the fire of strange high-angle guns from the Blue land-batteries, guns whose existence explained the disappearance of so many of the scout craft of the American army.

Two things were certain. The Blue army was completely isolated in the midst of a hostile country, and the rest of the war in the north would be fought out without the aid of air-craft of any sort.

"Won't the Blues give up and surrender right away?" Tom asked his father, the same night.

Mr. Blakesley shook his head slowly.

"I wish I thought they would," he said. "But I'll let you answer that question for yourself, son. You've seen more of them than I have. Did they look to you like men who would give up easily?"

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Tom thought of the vast train-loads of the sturdy, quiet men wrapped in their gray overcoats, of the leather-helmeted cavalry trotting their horses over the frosty roads, of the black-uniformed men who did nothing but work, of the yellow paint on the sides of the flat-cars and on the sign-posts along the roads.

"No," he confessed, "I don't think they did."

For a few days after this Pittsfield lived on the news of victory that had already been received, and conditions grew almost normal again. Tom and Jack went back to their seemingly endless task at Warehouse No. 5. Mr. Blakesley was spending some hours every day trying to get into communication with Bradley, but this seemed impossible. Communications in other directions were being rapidly restored, but it was impossible to get a message of any sort five miles past the farthest advanced of the American outposts—and this point was many miles short of Bradley, and even Cold Creek, for that matter.

Mr. Blakesley was frankly worried over this, and admitted as much to Tom.

"Your mother and Mrs. Ranney are probably safe enough now," he said, one day at

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the lunch-table, "and it may be that there never will be any danger and that Bradley has seen the most of war that it's going to see. But an army beaten and in retreat is much more dangerous to civilians than one advancing with every prospect of victory, and I don't like to think of the Blue retreat going the way of Bradley."

It was several days after this, and more than a week after Tom and Jack had returned to the city, that the blanket of silence which seemed to have fallen upon the two armies in the north was lifted for the first time since the destruction of the Blue airships.

Nobody paid much attention to these first filterings of news. There had been little fighting, just a few brushes between outposts and cavalry. The only significant fact was that the Blues seemed to be advancing instead of falling back, but this was no great surprise, as it seemed almost as easy for them to go forward as to go back.

It was true that there was no large American force in their rear, but every step to the north took them farther from the sea-coast and farther from any chance of ever effecting a junction with their southern army.

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On the same day that the removal of the perishable goods from Warehouse No. 5 was completed fell the first blow of the Blue sledge-hammer. The report did not come to streets filled with eager, confident crowds, as had the reports of the two great victories. It ticked in over the wires in the newspaper offices at two o'clock in the morning, and people were roused from sleep by the shrill voices of the newsboys.

It was a different story that the wires carried this time, and the long days of silence were explained. The American army, confident that the news of their double defeat would have had its effect on the Blue army, had left their defenses and assumed the offensive. That their move might be as secret as possible (for Blue spies were thought to be everywhere) they had prevented the correspondents in the field from putting their despatches on the wires.

But the news could not be held back. Instead of being crippled by disaster, the Blue army seemed to have gained strength, and in this first measuring of strength between the two land forces the Americans had been badly beaten. The situation of the isolated

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invaders was not much bettered, but it was now certain that for the time at least the American forces between Pittsfield and the foe would have to rely on their defenses. They were not yet strong enough to meet the Blues in the open field.

Then, before the city had recovered from the first shock of surprise, the blows fell thick and fast. It was no longer the sudden appearance of Blue troops in unexpected places; that phase of the war had passed. It was a smashing, powerful frontal attack, a succession of terrific blows like the punches of a trained boxer.

First two or three small parties of Americans were cut off and captured, and on the heels of this came a daring cavalry raid that succeeded in spite of the fact that according to all the rules of modern warfare it should have been a complete failure.

Next came the capture of several strong outposts, and after that a grueling, hammering, all-day fight with artillery that ended in the retreat of the American army from the outer line of defense.

In the outskirts of the city, when the wind was right, the booming of the guns had been

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audible at times during this last engagement. It was known that some of the enemy's troops were now less than twenty miles from the city.

For the second time Pittsfield fell into the grip of panic. The first exodus—the one in which Tom and Jack had had their part—had been to the north. This second flight from the city was southward, and this time the railroads could do their share.

"If you want to go, you can," Mr. Blakesley told Tom. "There are plenty of places where you can go and wait till it's over. For my part, I can't leave. My business requires my presence here."

"I'll stay," Tom said, shortly.

"There'll be plenty for you to do, I'll promise you that," his father told him.

So, while the city emptied itself to the south and the booming of guns was often audible, Tom became a man of business and learned more of his father's affairs in a few days than he had ever found out before in his life.

Mr. Blakesley was a wholesale grocer. Before the outbreak of the war his various warehouses had been well filled with goods of all sorts. Now, with the market low and shipping facilities of the poorest, he found it

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a hard matter to fill such orders as he had. Before long, however, it appeared that it would be an easy matter to dispose of his great stock to local retailers, and Mr. Blakesley was anxious to empty all six of his big warehouses as rapidly as possible.

Ordinarily this work would have been as distasteful to Tom as the few days at No. 5 had been. But, like every other citizen of Pittsfield, he felt that he was working against time. Off there to the north, now, the faint sounds of artillery fire were almost always audible. There were few troops in the city; all of them had gone to the front.

And the grim side of war was beginning to show itself. Trains from the north brought in sorry burdens of wounded men. All the great hospitals of the city were full, and the sight of long strings of army ambulances was increasingly familiar.

Then, just as the city was settling into a sort of rut and getting used to the distant booming of guns, came tidings of a fresh disaster—the last news from the outside world to the north that Pittsfield was to have for many a day.

A second and much smaller American army,

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carried to the northwest by rail and by forced marches, had co-operated with the main force and attempted to take the Blues in flank, only to be beaten off with heavy loss. The main American army was forced to fall back to the third line of defense, and the flanking force was cut off and almost destroyed.

On the morning after this news had reached the city Mr. Blakesley called Tom into his office.

"Tom," he said, "I want you to tackle a man's size job to-day. There's a lot of stuff to go to Villa Heights, and the suburban people can't handle it. It's got to go by dray. Peterson's at No. 4, Sandford's out at Three, and there's nobody else to go. Want to tackle it?"

Of course, Tom agreed; and his father explained carefully all that he had to do. There was no great difficulty about this. Tom was furnished with a list of the goods that were to go to the suburban grocer and had to see to it that all the articles named were packed on the two big drays which were to carry it. Then he had to secure the grocer's receipt and return to the city.

Owing to the fact that all the motor-trucks owned by Blakesley & Co. were fairly over-

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run with work inside the city proper, the old horse-drawn drays were pressed into service for the suburban trade, as these latter orders were for the most part smaller and less important.

"I'm going to leave a good deal to your judgment, Tom," Mr. Blakesley said, when Tom climbed to the seat of the foremost loaded dray. "Villa Heights is well inside the fourth line, and there ought not to be the slightest danger, particularly as Villa Heights is straight south of town. The papers this morning insist that the third line can never be pierced. But if you think you're running into any danger, bring the stuff back. We can't afford to run risks."

Villa Heights was a suburb lying about twelve miles south of the warehouse where Tom saw the two drays loaded. A good many of its inhabitants had left, but evidently enough had remained to justify Mr. Harris, the grocer, in laying in a fresh supply of goods.

The way lay for the most part over well-paved streets, and even the heavily loaded trucks could make good time. Just beyond the city proper they came to the inner line of

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defenses, and here some little time had to be spent in convincing the soldiers on guard of the destination of the supplies.

Tom looked with great interest at as much of the defenses as he could see. At first glance they did not seem to amount to much, but Tom soon discovered that this appearance was due to the fact that the real defenses were concealed, and he caught glimpses of batteries, great steel barbettes, houses with the upper stories sheared off and the lower floors turned into forts, little patches of woods cut down, the trees piled into bristling heaps, with the tops pointing to the north.

Everywhere on the ground fluttered little red flags, and near every flag was a soldier with his musket over his arm.

"What do you suppose those flags are?" Tom asked the silent driver on the seat beside him.

The driver took his pipe out of his mouth to answer. "I don't suppose; I know!" he said. "I served in the army once—engineering corps. Those red flags mean mines. There's enough explosive buried under the inner line of defense to blow half a township into the air."

CHAPTER XX

BETWEEN the inner line of defense and the next one beyond it were the camps of many of the reserves and some of the field hospitals. Tom was glad when they had passed through this zone of tents and got into the more open country beyond. The sights and sounds about the hospital tents were not pleasant.

"There'll be enough sight more of that sort of thing before this business is over!" the burly driver said, sourly.

They reached the first scattered houses of Villa Heights after a rather uneventful journey. They had been forced to make one stop to repair a tire on the second dray, but this had been the only delay, and the trip had been made in two hours and a half.

Villa Heights looked like a deserted town. There were few people in the streets, and many of the houses were closed, with shutters at the doors and windows. No troops

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of any sort were visible, and Tom commented on this.

"There were enough of 'em here last week," the driver said. "Town was full of infantry and guns. All gone farther out after what happened yesterday, I guess."

The drays drew up at the rear of Mr. Harris's store. The grocer, a nervous little man, came out and ran over the lists which Tom handed him.

"You're pretty much of a boy to be at this sort of thing, aren't you?" he asked; and then, without giving Tom a chance to answer, he rattled on. "But this is nothing. We'll have boys in the ranks if things go on in this fashion much longer. A pretty business, I call it. I'll come out of this war a ruined man, and there'll be a lot of us—yes, sir, a lot of us!"

The unloading of the drays was commenced without delay, and the two drivers, assisted by two or three men who had been hanging around the grocery, promised to make short work of the job. Barrels and boxes were being hustled through the trap-door into Mr. Harris's cellar at a great rate when there came the sound of hurrying footsteps in the

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street beyond the alley where the drays stood.

The next instant a man stuck his head around the corner of the store. He was bareheaded and his face was covered with perspiration, although it was a cold day and Tom had been glad of a heavy overcoat and a fur cap on the long drive.

"Blue!" yelled the bareheaded man, wildly. "Blues right here in the town. Run for your lives!"

Suiting his action to his words, he turned and scampered off as fast as his legs would carry him.

The work of unloading the drays stopped. The big driver took off his cap and scratched his head.

"The man must be crazy," he said. "We're pretty near forty miles from the nearest Blue, unless—"

He jumped down from the dray and ran out into the street, Tom and the others at his heels. The street was paved with brick, with a double trolley-track in the center of it, and lined on either side with trim houses and flat-buildings. There were two or three delivery-wagons in the street, but nothing else.

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As they stood watching and listening, however, there came a sudden sharp rattle of firing. The big driver struck his gloved hands together sharply.

"By George!" he exclaimed, "our bare-headed friend was right. Some way or other they've got into the south! Hurry and get this stuff unloaded, boys. There may be lead flying here in a few minutes."

They went feverishly to work, and the groceries disappeared like magic, but the last box was hardly out of sight when they heard a clatter of hoofs on the brick pavement and an excited cavalry officer was bawling at them from the saddle.

"Get those horses unhitched and haul those drays out into the street—quick!" he shouted.

In no time the two teams of big gray Percherons were unhitched, and a dozen men (who seemed to have sprung from nowhere) were dragging the drays out into the street.

Down the center of the street came clattering what appeared at first to be a mass of riderless horses. Tom stared at them and saw that every fourth horse had a rider who was holding the bridles of the other three,

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and Tom knew that cavalry were in action somewhere on foot.

But he had little time to watch the horses, for the officer was still shouting orders and the big drays were being turned over on their sides, while several troopers were rolling barrels and boxes out of the grocery, and Mr. Harris stood in the doorway wringing his hands and crying that he was being robbed.

In no time at all a rough barricade stretched across the street from curb to curb and the riderless horses had gone clattering into shelter around a corner several blocks down the street.

And now the dismounted cavalrymen came suddenly into view at the farther end of the street, falling back in a ragged line, firing as they retreated. Tom could see no smoke, but the rattle of the rifles sounded clearly, and he could judge the speed of their fire by the rapidity with which the rifles rose and fell.

"Under cover!" he heard the driver saying. "It's going to be hot."

Tom did not wait to see anything else, but bolted through the open door of the grocery like a frightened rabbit. Somehow this

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was different from all that he had gone through. The elements of the strange and unusual, which had marked all his other experiences, were lacking here. There were no airships to make him wonder, none of the unusual physical sensations which he had experienced in the balloon to take his mind off other considerations.

He was thinking only of himself and his own safety. He quite understood the speechless, dumb terror of Mr. Harris, who sat in a heap on the edge of his counter, unable to move, unable even to cry out. Tom kept wondering how soon the Blues would be upon them and whether the walls of the grocery would stop bullets.

A glance out the door showed him the officer, on foot now, his drawn sword in his hand, getting his men under cover of the rude barricade as fast as they reached it.

"Come on, son!" He felt the big driver's hand gripping his shoulder, and followed him without a word.

They hurried back through the store, out a rear door, and out into the brick-paved alley where they had unloaded the drays. The driver paused and looked about him.

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From the street came the increasing rattle of rifles.

"It 'll be cavalry," the driver muttered, as though talking to himself—"cavalry and quick work, and the street won't be any comfortable place. Maybe they're after supplies. Suppose we get farther along, youngster. You never can tell where bullets will go when they get to tearing through wood and plaster and glancing off brick pavement."

They scaled a high board fence, dropped into a yard, hurried across it, always keeping something between them and the street, and into a covered walk at the rear of the house.

The driver looked up at the shuttered rear door.

"Folks gone off and left it," he said. "I'm for getting inside and lying low a bit till we see what's going to happen."

It did not take long for a man of the driver's strength to pry a shutter from the cellar window, smash the glass, and unfasten the clasp.

"All right. Jump along!" he called to Tom, as he crawled through the window.

They raced through the cellar and up the stairs. The door which led into the kitchen had not been locked, and they soon reached

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the main floor of the house. Evidently the inhabitants had left it in a good deal of hurry, for everything was in confusion. Furniture was overturned, drawers stood open, the doors of bare cupboards gaped widely.

"Up-stairs!" ordered the driver. "They won't be shooting very high with a mark like these drays and barrels to shoot at!"

From the windows of one of the front rooms, out of which they cautiously thrust their heads, they could overlook the barricade. It was now lined with men and covered with a blue haze from the smokeless powder. None of the Blues were actually in sight, but little spurts of bluish gray from behind distant trees and the corners of houses showed where they were.

For several minutes the fight seemed at a standstill. Tom saw men fall behind the barricade. They did not throw up their hands and crash over backward as they did in pictures and on the stage, but dropped limply down where they stood.

The Blue uniforms poured out from behind trees and houses and came rushing down the street. The rifles behind the barricade crackled and spit; the Blues fell thickly, but



THE RIFLES BEHIND THE BARRICADE CRACKED AND SPIT; THE BLUES FELL THICKLY, BUT THEY CAME ON IN SPITE OF IT

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they came on in spite of it. Tom saw the officer trying to hold his men to their work, but they broke in spite of him.

"Why don't they fight?" Tom cried, angrily, quite forgetting that there was any one with him.

"Too many of the Blues," answered the driver. "Can't stop 'em now. But they'll have to hurry if they get clear. They've stirred up a hornets' nest."

From every side came pelting the Blue soldiers. They jumped from behind trees and fences, even came out of houses. They swarmed down upon the barricade, surrounded it, and almost before Tom realized what they were doing, they had got the two drays up on their wheels.

The driver was talking to himself, the admiration of the old soldier drowning every other feeling.

"See what they're trying?" he exclaimed. "They're going to try to load those drays and run 'em through the lines. Did you ever hear of nerve like that? I almost hope they'll do it. The world hasn't seen many such soldiers!"

The American cavalry seemed to have

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vanished. The Blues, working like so many beavers, flung out a line of sentries beyond the barricade. The rest, even as the driver had predicted, were piling goods from the store onto the drays as fast as they could.

"But how did they get here at all?" Tom broke out.

"You just tell me!" answered the driver. "Just because they're always playing against the rules and doing the unexpected thing. Found a gap in the lines somewhere and slipped through. Look—now they're in for it!"

The beaten cavalry, evidently reinforced from somewhere, were coming back to the fight. The men themselves were not in sight, but the banging of their Springfields and the sudden activity of the line of Blue sentries told their own story.

For a few minutes the Blues, daring to the point of recklessness, actually attempted to complete the loading of the drays, and went so far as to hitch the horses to them. The driver gave a harsh exclamation.

"That's the end of my team!" he cried.

And, sure enough, the unhappy beasts were shot down in the traces before they were more than half hitched.

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Now the Blues seemed to realize that it was a case for speed, but they turned cautious too late. They were assailed from three directions at once. Tom saw brown figures scurrying through distant streets and back yards, windows thrown open in houses on the opposite side of the street, and brown gun-barrels thrust out.

"Cellar for ours now," said the driver. "There won't be a whole window in ten blocks inside five minutes."

CHAPTER XXI

THEY clattered down the stairs, but even as they reached the lower floor there came a series of shattering crashes, and the side-door burst open, letting a panting crowd of American infantrymen into the room.

"Here, you two, lend a hand here!" bellowed a corporal at the head of them.

What little order remained in the deserted house gave way in no time before the attacks of the soldiers. Doors were wrenched down from their hinges and piled against the outer walls of the house, beds ripped to pieces, the mattresses wound in the bedding and turned into little breastworks which were piled in front of every window.

The corporal stood in the center of the room, bellowing orders. Part of the men stationed themselves at the windows of the lower floor; the rest hurried up-stairs. Obeying the heavy hand of the truck-driver, Tom flattened himself out on the floor, panting

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from the labor of carrying doors and mattresses, and waited.

Hardly had the Americans posted themselves at the windows when their rifles began to speak. Inside the little room the reports of the rifles crashed like thunder. The room filled with a blue haze and the acrid smell of burnt powder. Bullets from outside whipped through the windows and crashed into the wall. From outside the house sounded a steady rattle of firing, shouts, cries, the occasional clatter of footsteps. Only from the occasional shouts of the men at the window could Tom and his companion tell anything of the progress of the fight.

They heard one man call out, "They're out of the barricade!"

And a few minutes later the corporal shouted: "Keep 'em away from that brick house if you can, boys. 'Twould take us an hour to get 'em out of that."

But, though the Blue raid had failed of its object and the little force of the invaders was by this time completely surrounded, the fight was by no means over. The leader of the Blues saw that he had a single chance to break through the encircling lines of the

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Americans at one point. And he selected as his objective the house where Tom and the driver lay on the littered floor of the kitchen.

There was nothing careful or deliberate about the attack. The Blues gathered out of sight, broke cover with a sudden rush, and charged the house as though they intended to throw themselves bodily at its walls. They did not fire, but took the sharp volleys that bit at them at such murderously short range as if they had been showers of rain.

Tom had dragged himself to his feet when a heavy hand gripped him and he half staggered, half fell down the stairs into the cellar just as the door slammed to behind him.

Crouching in the shadows of the cellar, he and the driver listened to the terrible sounds of the hand-to-hand fight in the narrow kitchen above their heads. These sounds lasted only a few seconds, then came the sharp, jerky speech of the Blues.

"They'll try to fight their way out from house to house," the driver whispered in Tom's ear. "All we need to do is keep still as we can."

Minute after minute they squatted there in the shadowy cellar, listening to the sounds

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of the fight. The Blues did not attempt to defend the house they had captured more than a few minutes, after which they rushed the next one. Gradually the sounds of firing grew fainter, the reports of the rifles less frequent. At last they ceased altogether.

The driver rose to his feet and stretched his cramped limbs. "Guess we can get out safely now," he said.

The brick-paved street, which had looked so neat and orderly when Tom had seen it from the seat of the dray a short time before, looked as though a cyclone had struck it.

About the barricade the ground was covered with fallen men, and the brown and blue uniforms were all mixed up together. Mr. Harris's grocery looked as though it had exploded. The entrance was piled full of smashed boxes, bags, and packages of all sorts, the windows had been smashed and the door half torn from its hinges, and the walls were speckled with bullet-holes.

It was easy enough to follow the course of the fight from house to house, for both the Americans and their foes had lost heavily in the short-range fighting. Every house had been the scene of a separate fight, and

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from the ways the windows were smashed and the dead piled up around the doors it was easy to tell how each miniature siege had ended.

Tom and the driver came presently upon a little column of Americans with a group of prisoners in their midst. The captured Blues did not look at all broken-spirited, but glanced around them with evident interest.

"Going to take an awful lot of beatings to whip those chaps!" the driver remarked.

It was night when they reached the city, and they made their way in an armored interurban car which traveled slowly, heavily guarded by troops. On all sides the country which had been almost deserted in the morning was now swarming with soldiers. This sudden raid of cavalry from a totally unexpected quarter had thoroughly alarmed the Americans.

From this moment Pittsfield was shut off from the rest of the world. The siege had commenced.

Tom found his father almost frantic. News of the raid had come into the city while the fighting at Villa Heights was still going on. Terribly alarmed, Mr. Blakesley had at-

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tempted to go to the suburb in a taxi-cab, but had been turned back by the patrols which now closed every road.

It was some hours before Mr. Blakesley had recovered himself sufficiently to talk, and he kept hold of Tom's hand as though he had to keep reassuring himself that the boy was really alive and unhurt.

They were sitting in the front room after dinner when Tom got to his feet restlessly and went toward the window.

"Are my ears buzzing," he asked, "or is it thunder?"

"Neither," answered his father. "It's another battle, Tom, and much nearer this time. It looks a bit as though the Blues did have a Hannibal, and that the threatened siege is no newspaper scare, after all!"

A siege! The mere word was terrifying. Why, Tom thought, sieges often lasted for months and months, and people had to eat rats and all sorts of horrible food. He looked up to see his father drawing a telegram from his pocket.

"But we've got one comfort, anyhow, Tom," he said. "This telegram came in from Bradley this afternoon, after going in a

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roundabout way more than six hundred miles to get here. Your mother and the others at Bradley were safe day before yesterday. We've only ourselves to worry over—and I guess we can do that, can't we?"

Tom paused an instant, and the dull roar of the distant battle hummed in his ears.

"I guess we can, father," he said, bravely.

CHAPTER XXII

LIKE every other boy of his age, Tom Blakesley had read a good deal about the great sieges of history, and knew something about the most famous of them from Troy to Port Arthur and Adrianople. So when he knew that his native city was on the verge of a siege he had visions of long, weary weeks during which the enemy's trenches and parallels were driven closer, of bombardments and the building of bomb-proofs, night attacks, desperate sorties, and all the events of which he had so often read.

He did not realize that the siege of Pittsfield was destined to differ fundamentally from all the other sieges that had ever occurred and that it was going to threaten to overturn some of the principles of military science.

The situation was unique. The Blue army could not possibly take time for the ordinary progress of siege operations. It would not

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attempt to blockade or starve out the city; the inhabitants of Pittsfield would have plenty of food long after the supplies of the Blue army had been exhausted.

It was, in short, as though the Blue army were a football team standing almost the full length of the field from the foe's goal-line, with the field-goal scored against them, and only two minutes in which to score a touch-down. The Blues were stronger than the army in front of them, but they could not be stronger for long; every day would see the American forces increased and the supplies of the Blues at a lower ebb. So, like the desperate football team, they could not buck the line and attempt trick plays of the wildest and most unexpected sort.

Of course, the commanders of the American army realized this. They knew exactly the sort of tactics the enemy would have to follow, and they were prepared (as well as man can be) for the unexpected. But the inhabitants of Pittsfield who had remained in the city and not fled from their homes had not the faintest idea what to expect.

Neither Tom nor his father slept much during the night which followed the cavalry

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raid at Villa Heights. All night long the roar of the distant battle dominated all other sounds. At first it was like the sound of distant surf or the muttering of a heavy thunder-storm, but with the coming of night and the stopping of the ordinary sounds of the city—like the rumbling of street traffic and the clanging of street-cars—the sound took on a different and more sinister tone.

Mr. Blakesley and Tom spent most of their time at the windows in the third story. Far to the north a steady red glare lighted up the sky, where farm-houses, barns, and perhaps some of the most distant suburbs had been set on fire.

"Do you think we'll win, father?" Tom asked.

"Not yet, Tom," Mr. Blakesley answered. "Our soldiers are just as brave as the Blues, but they haven't learned the business of fighting as thoroughly. I'm afraid we'll learn that there's been another defeat by morning."

Tom did not know when the distant clamor ceased, but when he opened his eyes in the faint light of early morning the house was very still.

Mr. Blakesley did not go to the office at

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all. Pittsfield might have been a city of idlers, as far as some lines of business were concerned. Retail shops were open, but many of the stores were closed and barred, and all day armed guards were taking money and valuable securities from the vaults of the banks and shipping them to the south.

The newspapers published extras which contained nothing but wild guesses. No news came from the front, even though the fighting had brawled closer to the city than ever.

Strange sights began to be seen in the streets. People no longer left the city in a hurry, taking only suit-cases with them, but the streets in certain directions were full of carriages, autos, carts, and great crowds on foot, taking with them every valuable they could lay their hands on. It looked, Tom thought, like a gigantic moving-day in spring.

On the second day after the battle the entire city was covered with great posters urging all citizens to leave Pittsfield at once if they intended to go at all, and warning them that on the next day all roads and railroads would be closed and that no one would be allowed to go in or out of the city in any direction. There were lists of the railroads which

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would carry passengers that day and of the roads which were still comparatively safe from the Blues.

The posters went on to state that the city might be bombarded and that safety of life and property could not be guaranteed, but added at once that the southern army of the Blues had been checked and that great reinforcements were pouring toward Pittsfield from all sides and that any day might see the war ended and the danger over.

Schools and theaters had been closed, many of them having been turned into hospitals, and the usually busy streets took on an empty and desolate appearance. The Ranneys, who lived in a big house several blocks from the Blakesleys, closed their house, and Mr. Ranney and Jack came to live with Tom and his father.

It was a strange sort of life on which they entered. There was really nothing to do. Mr. Ranney and Mr. Blakesley would go to their offices for a little while in the morning, and the boys would wander out into the streets, where there was nothing to be seen except the almost unbroken strings of army wagons and troops passing in every direction. The ser-

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vants had all left and they had to cook their own meals, which was fun for a day, but soon grew tiresome enough.

Twenty-four hours after the first posters appeared the city was put under martial law, and warnings of all sorts were issued to the inhabitants.

The four inmates of the Blakesley house established an almost military system of their own. Certain duties were laid out, such as getting the meals, going after supplies, running the furnace, etc., and Mr. Ranney tacked a sheet of paper to the wall in the front hall. This paper bore the lists of things to be done and assigned definite tasks to each of the four.

And all this time the almost incessant roaring of guns—nearer every day—told them of the succession of battles which was deciding the fate of the city and the Blue army. News of these battles was going to the outside world, but the inhabitants of the city learned of them only through scraps of information from passing troops and the vague rumors in the newspapers.

For two days this strange, unreal sort of life continued, then there came another long stretch of steady firing, and this time the red

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glare in the sky was on almost every side of the city.

The following morning came the conscription!

Driven in at many points, exhausted by the necessity of meeting terrific attacks from half a dozen directions at once, the army of defense sent out a call for help. There would be little doubt that the Americans would be ultimately forced to fall back behind the inner line of works—that rampart at which men had been working incessantly since the first appearance of the Blues.

It was Mr. Ranney who came home with the news. It had been his turn to go after groceries and to collect any information that he could gather. He came into the house, dropped his packages on the dining-room table, and plunged at once into an account of what had happened.

"There's a sort of rough conscription," he explained. "Every able-bodied man between the ages of sixteen and forty-five is liable for service. Not actual service in the field, I understand, but work on the inner defenses for the most part. They're going to draw a hundred men from every voting precinct in

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the city. The lists are to be posted to-morrow morning."

"There's just one thing for us to do, then," Mr. Blakesley said. "We'll have to volunteer. We don't want to be separated."

"That's what I thought," answered Mr. Ranney. "We may have to go through things in the next few days that none of us has ever dreamed of, and we want to stick together through it if we can."

The four of them held a council of war at once. Just what would be required of them they had no idea, but they decided upon certain things.

Each one of the four was provided with a key to the house, and it was planned that each of them should come to the house at least once a day, if possible, and leave some sort of word of what they were doing, so that they could keep track of one another. The house was to be the general meeting-place in case they were all relieved of duty.

Early the next morning they tramped off to the voting-place of the precinct. Two or three officers and a few soldiers were gathered in a knot outside the little building, and a

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typewritten list of names was pinned to the door.

"There's just a chance that none of us has been drawn," Mr. Blakesley said, as they approached the building, "and in that case there's no particular need of our volunteering."

The others agreed, and the two men went forward to look at the list.

By a strange freak of chance both Jack and Tom had been drawn, but neither of their fathers' names appeared.

"I don't suppose we can offer ourselves in place of these two boys, can we?" Mr. Ranney asked the officer who seemed to be in charge of the drawing.

The soldier glanced at the four sharply.

"Nope," he said, shortly. "They can do more work than you can, and that's what we're after. Can't be done."

It was arranged, then, that Mr. Blakesley and Mr. Ranney were to return to the house, it being altogether likely that the boys would be able to get home at night.

Not many people had tried to dodge the conscription, apparently, for within an hour there was quite a crowd of men and boys

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gathered about the voting-place. The officers wasted no time, but divided the crowd into squads and hurried them off in different directions.

The two boys, with perhaps a dozen others, none of whom they had ever seen before, were led away by a grizzled sergeant of engineers, hurried on board a flat-car drawn by an ordinary trolley-car, and jerked and bumped off toward the southwest.

"Now remember," the sergeant cautioned them, "from now on you men are no different from soldiers. If a man can prove that he's sick he'll be let off, but there'll be no shirking. You'll have to obey orders like any other soldiers, and it won't do to ask questions. When you're told to do something, do it. It's going to be hard work, and any man trying to sneak off will be shot. That isn't a threat; it's just a plain warning."

Although Tom had often been in this part of the city before, he would never have recognized it. Factories had been turned into hospitals or supply depots, lumber-yards had been cleaned out absolutely, the city baseball park had been turned into a huge open-air blacksmith shop.

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They left the car near a district called the Deadwater, a strip of low land which was often flooded in the spring, but was now a stretch of marshy ground and mud, with a small stream of water running through the midst of it. No houses or buildings of any sort were on the Deadwater itself, but long strings of workmen's houses (each exactly like the one next to it save for minor differences of color) stood on both sides of it.

Tom thought for an instant, as they left the car, that they had come into a district where sewer or gas repairs of some sort had been left uncompleted, but he soon discovered that he had come to a part of the great inner line of defense, of which he had caught one glimpse on the long drive to Villa Heights.

Everywhere were men and horses, scoops drawn by teams of thin, tired-looking horses, and tremendous confusion. It looked like any big piece of construction work where large numbers of men were being employed, only the uniforms of the soldiers made it seem different.

The sergeant who had brought them on the trolley turned them over to an officer of

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engineers, and they were taken to a long shed, provided with picks, shovels, and crow-bars, then divided into squads, each in charge of a soldier or a man in overalls with a red-and-blue badge tied around his arm.

CHAPTER XXIII

FORTUNATELY for Tom, he was set to work beside a middle-aged infantryman from one of the regular regiments. The man had been wounded in one of the first skirmishes and had been sent to work at the defenses from the field hospital instead of back to his regiment. He was a talkative fellow, and from him Tom learned the real significance of the feverish work which was going on all about him.

"Battery of heavy guns going in here," the infantryman explained, as they wielded their picks and shovels. "Ought to have been in a week ago, I say, but them Blues have kept us busy. Never see anything like it! Guess they don't sleep at all. Why, there's been fighting somewhere around the city every minute since that aeroplane was busted!"

Gangs of men, burrowing like moles, were hollowing out a series of deep pits, each one destined to be the emplacement for a heavy

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gun. In front of them other gangs were tearing up the brick pavement, leaving nothing but the strips of brick and concrete which kept the rails of the street-car line rigid.

Across the street another and more dismal sort of work was going forward. The occupants of a long string of wooden houses were being evicted. An officer followed by several troopers from a cavalry regiment went rapidly from door to door, and left swearing men, tearful women, and crying children behind them.

"What are they going to do to those houses?" Tom asked, pausing to get his breath and rest the tired muscles of his back and arms—for he had found that hammering half-frozen ground with a pick was not the easy work it had looked.

"Dynamite 'em!" said Cole, the convalescent infantryman.

"Dynamite 'em!" repeated Tom. "What for?"

"In the way of guns," explained Cole. "Can't have things getting in the way of artillery, ye know. Got to have big open spaces in front of 'em."

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"But the people that live there," Tom persisted. "What will become of them?"

"Dun'no'," answered Cole, stooping to lift a rock out of his way. "Nobody knows. Can't stop to bother with such things. They've got to get out, and the houses have got to come down, and that's the end of it."

This was still another angle which Tom had never seen before. Here were these people, poor workmen, all of them, clinging to their wretched homes because they could not afford to leave the city, and now their houses were to be destroyed as though they had been so many rabbit-hutches!

"I think it's a shame," he blurted out.

"So it is," answered Cole, "so it is. It's all a shame. But s'pose they let them houses stay, and a lot o' Blues crawled up in the night after the battery 'd been put in position, and opened fire on the gunners the next morning. What then? Battery wouldn't last five minutes! And it just might happen, ye see, that this battery 'd stand between Pittsfield and defeat.

"Nope, it's hard lines for them folks who're goin' out into the street, but it might be

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enough sight harder if they left them houses standing."

With several hundred men working like mad, gun emplacements can be constructed in a hurry. The six great pits were hollowed out, their sides and bottoms lined with brick taken from the pavement, their walls further strengthened with beams ruthlessly ripped out of houses, and steel rails from some side-track.

"I thought they put earthworks or something up in front of them," Tom said.

"Not always these days," answered Cole. "Artillerymen don't have to see what they're shooting at any more. Indirect fire, they call it. Learned that from the French. Stick a gun in a hole and shoot something you can't see all to bits. That's the way they do it nowadays."

"Then I don't see why those houses have to be torn down," Tom persisted.

"Can't use indirect fire if things are at too close quarters," explained the patient soldier. "Artillery ain't expected to defend its own front; that's left to the infantry supports. But there's times when it has to."

At noon the working parties were fed—

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chunks of bread and scalding hot, bitter black coffee. Tom and Jack had a chance for a few words.

"Tired?" asked Jack.

"No, guess not!" grunted Tom. "My back feels like a rusty hinge. "Where've you been?"

"Tearing up pavement. I never will get the brick-dust out of me!"

They were given no time to loiter over their meal. While they were eating, the battery for which the gun-pits had been constructed came lumbering and clattering up. Tom had never been so close to large-caliber field-guns before. He had always thought them simple affairs, and he stared in surprise at the complicated mechanism of elevating-screws, sighting-devices, recoil-cylinders, and so on.

He would have liked to stay to see the battery put in position, but the relentless officer in charge of the civilian laborers had need of them somewhere else.

Again they were herded on board flat-cars and whirled off behind a bouncing, jolting trolley-car. On every side they saw the same sort of work going forward. Here

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houses were being strengthened and loop-holed for defense, there fresh trenches were being dug and gangs of men were cutting the traverses—trenches designed to protect the main works from a flank fire—and smaller trenches, running at right angles to the main line, so that men might enter and leave the trenches during an action without exposing themselves to the enemy's fire.

No sooner had Tom's muscles commenced to accustom themselves to one form of work than he was sent to doing something different. He had never known such fatigue. It seemed to him that he would drop in his tracks, but something kept him going. He lost track of time and had no idea in what part of the city he was. Jack and Cole had disappeared; he had not seen them for hours. For what seemed like an eternity he had been helping to fill grain-bags with sand—shoveling, shoveling until his shoulders ached and it seemed that he could not take another stroke.

"All right," a hoarse voice called from somewhere in the gathering darkness; "knock off for now. This way!"

Tom started to drop his shovel.

"Better keep it," suggested a middle-aged

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man who had been holding and tying the bags that Tom filled.

"Why," demanded Tom, "aren't we going home now?"

The man gave something between a groan and a chuckle. "Home!" he exclaimed. "You'd better try to forget that word, sonny. You aren't a boy with a home from now on. You're just something that can shovel and chop and dig and lift and push. You'd be a lot better off if you were a horse. I wish I was!"

Like so many slaves they were herded into a dreary, draughty building that had once been a machine-shop of some kind, but had been turned into a temporary barracks for the working parties. There was nothing to sleep on but the dirty wooden floor, no fire of any sort, and no prospect of anything to eat.

Gasolene-flares appeared from somewhere and were lighted. Tom had little curiosity to look about him, but the strange appearance of the crowd made him wonder in spite of his exhaustion and general wretchedness. There were more than a hundred men in the long room, some of them gray-haired, others mere

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boys who looked younger than Tom. Part of them were laborers, others wore the sort of clothes that Tom's father wore. But all of them looked utterly tired and discouraged.

Again they were fed on bread and strong coffee, and the gloomy, deserted shop seemed a little more cheerful after they had eaten. Tom felt sure that he would never be able to sleep on the hard floor—even if he could bring himself to sleep, anyhow. He was lonely, a little frightened, and terribly tired. Every bone in his body seemed to ache. Sleep, he thought, was the last thing in the world.

Yet sleep he did, and that within five minutes of the time he had gulped down the last scalding mouthful of coffee. The hard boards of the floor were forgotten, and he dropped off as though they had been the softest of mattresses.

He woke out of a wild dream of trumpets and thunder to see a bugler standing in the middle of the big room, blowing away at his instrument until his cheeks seemed on the point of bursting. An officer stood beside him shouting at the top of his voice.

"Come on!" he yelled. "Come on! Every-

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body up so I can get a look at you. You won't all have to go. Come, tumble up and get it over with!"

Groaning and muttering, the men and boys dragged themselves upright and stood in a rough line, rubbing their eyes, yawning, and shivering in the chill air.

The officer walked rapidly down the line, glancing sharply at each man that he passed, picking out a man here and there.

"Step out!" he said, crisply, as he came opposite Tom.

Followed by some twenty men, the officer hurried out into the darkness. It was drearily cold, and a chilling mist was falling.

"Can't they even let us sleep!" demanded the man next Tom. "Have we got to work all night as well as all day? Not for me!"

And before Tom had realized his intention the man had slunk off into the darkness and disappeared. Tom did not wonder, and yet no thought of deserting occurred to him. Moving as though in a dream, his eyes persisting in trying to shut in spite of his efforts to keep them open, he stumbled after his companions through the darkness.

There was no riding on trolleys this time.

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The men were led straight ahead into the blackness at a sharp pace. Tom knew that they crossed railroad-tracks, passed lines of the cheap wooden houses, and went through the crisscrossed trenches and fortifications of the inner line, where men slept in the rifle-pits with their weapons beside them or under the tail-pieces of the silent batteries.

The air seemed full of the sound of firing—so thoroughly full of it that there was no placing the direction from which the sound came. It seemed to be everywhere, and it was certainly closer than Tom had ever heard it before.

After walking steadily for some minutes the men were halted, and Tom caught snatches of talk between the officer who led them and another man, covered from head to foot in a glistening oilskin coat.

"The real thing this time. . . . All sides at once. . . . Battery No. 18 gone. . . . Boiler-works redoubt. . . . Cavalry everywhere. . . . No holding them out. . . ."

This much of the conversation Tom caught, then a sharp order was snapped off, and they trudged forward again. Although he could see little or nothing, Tom knew that the

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night was full of movement. Troops were afoot in every direction; he could hear the tread of feet and the sucking sound of boots in the deepening mud. Nobody offered to talk to him, and Tom felt no desire for speech. He was neither frightened nor interested. He had ceased caring particularly what happened. His one thought was that he could give anything to be able to crawl into bed somewhere and sleep as long as he wanted to.

They were halted again, and once more Tom caught a few words exchanged between the officers.

"Don't need 'em here yet," he heard some one saying, "but we will before daylight, fast enough. All quiet here so far, but they're sure catching it heavy over by Beverly and the Dells. They've been hammering away there since one o'clock."

Under the shelter of some ammunition-wagons Tom and the others found a brief chance to rest. Ordinarily Tom would have had little desire to drop onto the muddy ground, but now he rested against a wheel, stretched out his legs, and was asleep in an instant.

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A din of confused shoutings, the stamping of horses, rattle of wheels, and heavy bursts of firing aroused him. It was faintly light, and as he scrambled to his feet he got the first clear glimpse of his position.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ammunition-wagon under which he had been sleeping formed part of a great park of them—evidently the reserve supply of several regiments. The wagons lay in a shallow hollow behind a railway embankment. Back of them the ground was open, dotted here and there with sickly patches of timber, bits of marshy ground, brick-yards, abandoned railway-sidings, and switches—the usual landscape to be found on the outskirts of a big city.

Straight in front, the railroad embankment cut off Tom's view of the landscape, but the din of firing and the sharp whistling sounds overhead made it evident that some part of the American lines was just across the tracks and was even now being subjected to a sharp attack.

Tom sat up in a rather dazed condition. In the rush and confusion which had followed the sudden onset of the Blues the crowd of

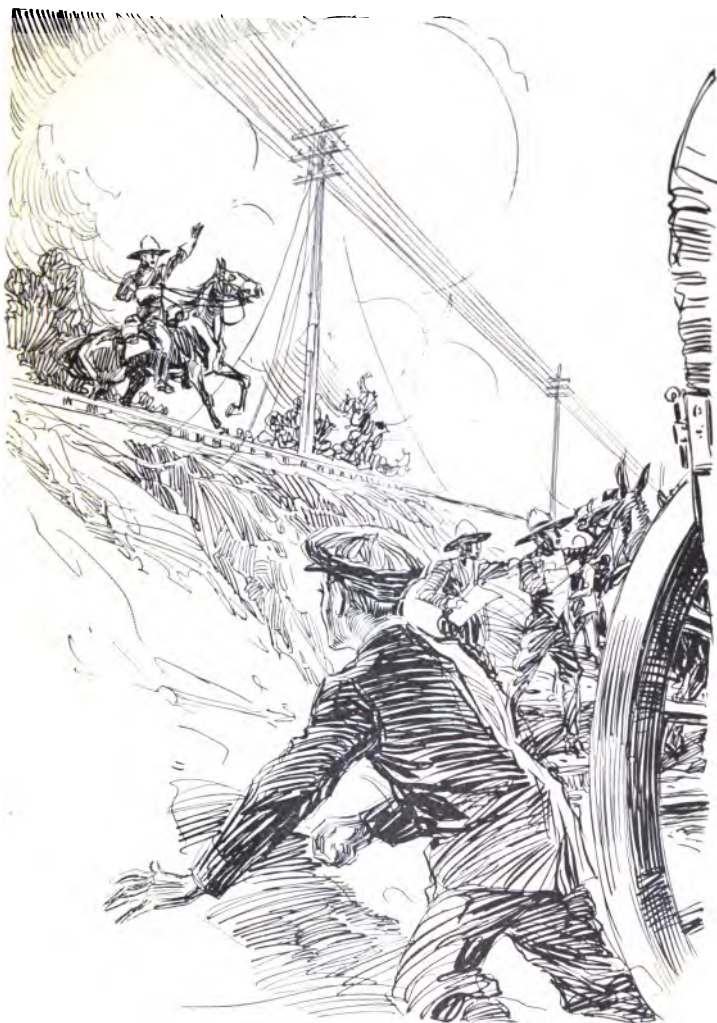
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men who had been lying under the wagons (whatever had been the purpose for which they had been brought there from the abandoned factory) had either fled or Tom had been overlooked and left behind. Certain it was that they were gone.

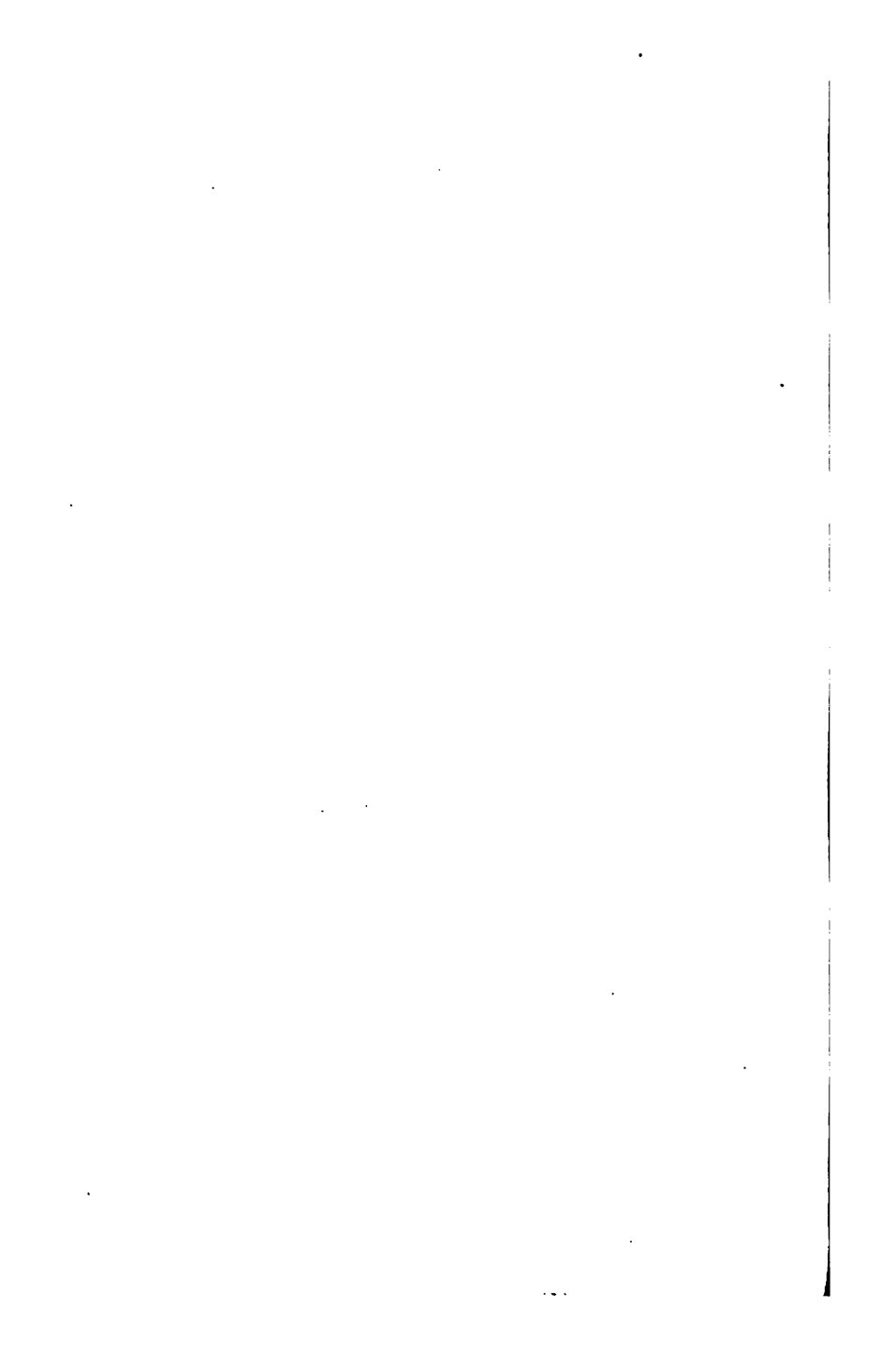
Reserve ammunition-wagons have no place within a few hundred feet of the actual firing-line, and the drivers and teamsters were making frantic efforts to hitch their frightened teams and get the lumbering wagons out of danger. A mounted officer, exposed to a terrible fire, was bawling down at them from the top of the railway embankment.

A quick scramble got Tom out from under the wheels of the wagon, and he scurried for the shelter of the high bank, found an open culvert, and crawled into its shelter.

For a little time he lay there, trying to decide upon a course of action. There seemed no immediate danger of being struck; it would be a freakish shot from a Blue rifle that would find his hiding-place. But if the Blue attack against whatever position lay the other side of the railroad succeeded, Tom's position would be uncomfortable in the extreme. He rather regretted that he had not



**A MOUNTED OFFICER, EXPOSED TO A TERRIBLE FIRE, WAS BAWLING DOWN
AT THEM FROM THE TOP OF THE RAILWAY EMBANKMENT**



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tried to crawl into some place in one of the ammunition-wagons, but that chance was gone, and he had no wish to cross the bare flat stretches behind him, raked as they must be by a dropping fire from the Blue attack.

"No use," he muttered. "I've got to see what's going on the other side."

He crawled cautiously up the cinder-covered slope and raised his head above the sheltering steel rail. Directly beneath him lay a long, deep trench full of brown figures. In every direction were more of the trenches; the ground was honeycombed with them.

For an instant Tom could not make out what they were firing at. The flat, bare stretches of country beyond, dotted with gaunt factory buildings, with strings of suburban houses on the sky-line, seemed perfectly empty.

Then a light-brown line of freshly turned earth caught his eye, and he understood. The fields out there were full of Blue trenches! The foremost rifle-pits of the opposing forces were not more than a couple of hundred yards apart.

As far as he could see in both directions brown squares and oblongs of men were

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crouching in the shelter of the embankment—reserves waiting to pour into the trenches or rush toward any point where the line threatened to break. Back of the infantry were massed batteries, the guns looming through clouds of thin gray smoke, the shells leaving beautiful curving paths of smoke in the air behind them.

There seemed no limits to the battle-front. Away off on the horizons Tom could see more troops, more trenches, more pounding batteries and bursting shells.

He knew now what the officer had meant that morning when he had said, "The real thing this time." It was the final great blow from the Blues, one stupendous rush against the American lines, destined either to smash through them or leave the Blue forces hopelessly beaten back and crushed.

The top of a railroad embankment, between the firing-line and the first reserve, is no very safe place in a general engagement, but Tom could not bring himself to move. The gigantic spectacle held him. He forgot his own danger, forgot everything except the battle.

Suddenly a brown field in front of him

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burst into life. The Blues had evidently been hurrying men up through the traverses into the foremost trenches, and now a great cloud of them came pouring out into the open, hesitated a second, gave a shrill cry, and came rushing forward.

Volley after volley slashed into them from the American trenches. Men went down as though each one of the tiny blue and gray figures had been attached to a string and a great number of the strings had been jerked at once. But, fast as they fell, the rest came on, and Tom saw a second Blue wave gathering behind the first, and a third forming in the rear of that.

And now the trench immediately below him became the target for half a dozen invisible Blue batteries. Shells came screaming through the air, buried themselves in the muddy ground, and burst with deafening reports, filling the air with flying mud and fragments of steel. Worse than the common shells was the shrapnel—projectiles filled with hundreds of bullets which burst with a peculiar sound and sent their murderous contents raking across the fields with terrible effect.

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Tom crawled back toward the fragile shelter of the culvert, expecting to be blown to atoms every instant. Shells burst on all sides of him, whirled and screeched over his head, banged off in the air above him. Once a jagged piece of steel whizzed past within a yard of his face; a bursting shell almost buried him in gravel and cinders. But somehow he got to the foot of the embankment alive and crawled into the narrow culvert.

He thought that the awful fire must have wiped out the occupants of the trench, but he saw a scurrying mass of brown figures come tumbling down the embankment, the officers vainly trying to rally the men; saw the firm lines of the reserves check and hold them firm for an instant, only to wither and crumple under a combined infantry and artillery fire that would have mowed the ground bare had it been covered with trees instead of men. Nothing could face such a fire; it was a case of sheer numbers against waning powers of endurance. Even the reserves could not check the headlong flight, and the brown masses broke a second time.

Farther back, the American batteries were limbering up and striving to escape threat-

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ened destruction. The whole country was swept by a human wave, driving back toward the city.

A man's head and shoulders suddenly blocked the other end of the culvert. Tom tried to get out, but there was no time.

"Don't shoot!" he called, wildly.

The man had dropped to the ground and lay there motionless. Tom could hear his labored breathing.

"Shoot!" he panted. "I've had enough shooting for the rest of my life."

He continued to lie there, panting terribly, gasping for breath. Tom could see a wide slouch-hat and light-brown cartridge-belt. He knew that the man was an American soldier, and edged closer.

"Are you wounded?" he asked.

The man rolled over onto his back and lay staring up at the top of the culvert, stretching out his arms and legs and wriggling his shoulders.

"I don't know," he said, slowly. "If I ain't I must be the only man in the world that ain't shot full o' holes! I thought I'd seen some fighting, but I didn't know the meaning of the word."

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He sat up and commenced feeling himself over cautiously. Tom had never seen such fear in a man's face before. Even Mr. Harris, the Villa Heights grocer, had not looked like this man. He had come alive out of a place where there had been nothing but death.

"I saw one shell get seven men," he said, raising his voice above the din of firing, "and when I was getting out of the trench they were going off right in my face like corn in a popper! Just human beings can't stand up to anything like that."

They crawled to the mouth of the culvert and looked out. Already masses of the Blues had poured down into the fields that had been full of American troops a few minutes before. The soldier stared and shook his head.

"Either they'll have to tear straight through or get underground," he said, "and they ain't in force enough to tackle the inner line yet."

The Blue batteries had ceased firing, and the infantry had commenced to fall back toward the captured trenches. Evidently, as the soldier suggested, the victors were not yet in sufficient strength to push home the final rush against the massive inner line, and they could not stand openly on the ground

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they had won. They must wait until they had gathered strength for another rush.

"We'll have to wriggle out o' here mighty sudden," the infantryman said. "Both sides 'll be hammering at this here railroad embankment with their batteries inside an hour, and there won't be a space as big as a cent for a man to stand on and live."

"But we can't get past the Blues," Tom objected.

"Well, we can't walk right through 'em, son, that's true," the man answered. "We'll have to crawl, and we'll have to hunt for a place where the crawling's good."

He stared out across the fields, and his face lighted up with satisfaction.

"It 'll be wet and cold," he said, "but the place was made for us. See that creek over there?"

Tom nodded.

"I marked that this morning," the soldier continued. "The water's low and the banks are a good three feet high. We can get in at this end, walk stooped over, and get through the lines—maybe."

He began taking off his cartridge-belt, bayonet, and haversack, and kicked his rifle

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to one side as though it had been a useless stick of wood.

Tom viewed these preparations with amazement.

"You're not going to leave those things, are you?" he asked.

"You just bet I am!" the man answered. "What I'm doing now is trying to get out with a whole skin, not fight. If I ever get back through the lines there'll be guns enough to go around, and them things ain't going to help us crawl through that creek-bed."

CHAPTER XXV

THEY left the shelter of the culvert, crawling on their hands and knees, and followed the foot of the embankment to the east. In their immediate neighborhood there was no firing, although it roared and bellowed loud as ever in other directions. Happily their course took them in a direction where the slashing, murderous fire of the Blues had not struck so hard, and the ground was practically free from dead and wounded.

At the end of two or three hundred yards they came to a wooden trestle and plunged into the icy waters of the little stream. It was deadly cold, but there seemed no help for it. Bending nearly double, and only standing upright when willows or bushes on the bank gave them a temporary shelter, they began working their way back toward the city.

As they progressed they found the bed

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of the stream fairly full of a trickling line of men, some wounded, some unhurt. The soldier frowned.

"Looks bad," he muttered. "So many of us 'll draw their fire sure, and they'll pot us like rats in this ditch."

But, whether this means of escape had been overlooked by the Blues or they simply did not bother to pelt the miserable line of stooping figures, certain it was that the fugitives continued their weary, chilling march unmolested, although the winding path of the stream sometimes led them back close to points where the Blue bearer-parties were already busy picking up the wounded.

They finally reached the flimsy shelter of a brick-yard, and here they left the protection of the stream and struck straight out across the fields. Vague movements in front of them, figures dodging from cover to cover, brief glimpses of batteries in motion, told them of troops moving between them and the bulwark of the inner line.

"They're getting ready for it," muttered the infantryman. "Much good it 'll do! If they had walls of steel six feet thick they couldn't stop these Blues."

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"You mean that they're going to get into the city?" Tom demanded, aghast.

The soldier stopped and stared at him. "Get in? Why, they're going in just as sure as the sun 'll rise to-morrow!" he said.

They tramped on for a ways in silence, and came after a time to a little cluster of houses. A couple of interburban lines had crossed each other here, and a bit of a village had sprung up: a dozen or so houses, two or three stories, all of them deserted and bearing evidences that they had been under fire during the last few hours. Chimneys were gone, roofs smashed in places, great holes gaping in the walls.

"I'm all in," the infantryman said, suddenly. "How about you?"

Tom admitted that he was tired; just how thoroughly tired he could hardly put into words.

"Then we'll just lay up here a bit," the infantryman decided. "After what we've been through this morning I guess we can stand anything, and if it gets too hot we'll clear out."

They had no trouble getting into one of the abandoned stores; the door was not even

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locked. It proved to be a sort of general store, and the two or three shells which had passed through it had wrought sad havoc with the contents. But they had spared a big, round stove that stood in the middle of the room, and there was plenty to eat.

In half an hour a good fire was roaring in the stove, and Tom and the soldier sat on a couple of broken chairs, munching crackers and cheese, each with a pile of tinned meats standing on the floor at his side.

"Not so bad, is it?" asked the soldier.

"But what are we going to do next?" Tom demanded. "We can't stay here for ever."

"I can think of enough worse places," the soldier said, glumly. "I'm no deserter, but I ain't going to run my head back into that hornets' nest right now. What good 'll one man do here? You and I've seen them Blues breaking things to bits just now, and take it from me, youngster, they ain't through!"

"But if they get between us and the city—" Tom commenced.

"Ah," the man cut in, "suppose they do. They'll get in, and that's going to be the end of 'em. They can take the town, I'll admit that. There's close to two hundred thousand

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of 'em, and not more'n half that many inside.

"But once the Blues are in, that's all there is to the show. They're stuck. They might as well be in the middle of the ocean. Just what happened to their other army."

Tom's eyes opened wide. "What?" he demanded.

The soldier made a sandwich of crackers and cheese and thrust the whole thing into his mouth.

"Ain't you heard?" he inquired. "Why, their whole southern army is bottled up somewhere close to the South Carolina line. Won three big fights, they did, but couldn't keep it up. And there's close to a quarter of a million of our boys sitting on their haunches in a big circle around 'em.

"That's what they get for trying to invade a country as big as the United States. It can't be done. They've made such a good effort as nobody thought they could, but they're at the end of their rope. And nobody 'll ever try it again. Remember that, son. This country's been invaded for the last time."

Tom sat munching away at his crackers

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and cheese and toasting his drenched legs at the red-hot stove. Gradually the battered, smashed walls and show-cases of the store and the figure of the soldier grew hazy and indistinct, swayed about, and finally vanished in a thick blanket of delightful sleep.

He awoke with a jerk to find his companion shaking him by the shoulder.

"Get up!" commanded the infantryman. "There's a sight outside that you won't forget in a million years."

He led the way to the rear of the store and up the flight of stairs. There was a gap in the very middle of them where a shell had ripped its way through.

As Tom ran he was conscious that there was a noise outside different from anything else he had heard. It was not firing, it was not the tramp of the infantry, nor yet the rattling noise made by nothing but artillery in motion.

The soldier led Tom to a smashed window and pointed. The little hamlet had been fairly engulfed by a perfect sea of horsemen. Great columns of them were trotting along the roads, long lines of them stretched across the fields.

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"Cavalry!" exclaimed Tom.

"Yep," answered the infantryman, "and a whole division of 'em, I should say. But what they're doing here's one too many for me. If them Blue batt'ries get a squint at 'em!"

They stood watching the stirring sight, Tom open-eyed with wonder, the infantryman with his head held between his tanned hands, frowning as he tried to reason out the presence of so great a force of the arm that was supposed to have outlived its fighting day.

"They wouldn't be such plain idiots as to sling 'em at the Blue foot and guns," he muttered to himself. "There wouldn't be no sense to a butchery like that. They wouldn't—" He slapped his leg, jumped from his place at the window, and hurried across the room to a window facing the south.

"Come here!" he called.

The flat, gloomy November landscape stretched off to the south, exactly the same sort of country through which Tom had been running and climbing and wading all day.

"See anything?" demanded the infantryman.

"No," answered Tom.

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"Look right between that red barn and the little clump of pines," the man directed him; "not close to 'em, but a mile or so farther back. Now do you see it?"

Tom strained his eyes. Off there in the distance he saw first a vague movement, then great, shifting masses.

"It's more cavalry!" he exclaimed.

"It's the Blue horse," the soldier said, "close to eight thousand of 'em if they haven't divided their forces. The best cavalry in the world, they call 'em. Why, boy, there's regiments out there that began in the Thirty Years' War, more'n three hundred years ago!"

"But I thought they didn't fight with cavalry any more," Tom said.

"No more do they," the other answered. "But don't you see how it is? There's a weak spot somewhere in the inner line, and both sides know it, but neither can spare infantry to attack or defend it. If the Blues could smash through with those ten regiments of horse the jig would be up!"

Fairly spellbound, the man and boy watched the first manœuvres of the great cavalry fight. Even as the infantryman had guessed, both

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sides had massed their horse at the weak point in the inner line of defense—the same place where Tom and the other victims of the conscription had toiled and delved all day—the Blues with the hope that their foot and guns might be able to occupy the defenders long enough to make possible a sudden rush, the Americans throwing forward their cavalry to take the pressure off their already badly overmatched infantry and artillery.

“Don’t look for a fight,” warned the soldier. “Like enough they’ll just stay here all day watching each other like two cats.”

For a long time this was exactly what the two huge bodies of horsemen did. Occasionally little knots of riders would push forward from this or that part of the opposing lines, only to fall back after each little rush. On each side batteries of artillery came dashing up, unlimbered, and filled the air with shells. On these occasions the more advanced bodies of horsemen scurried back to shelter, and the guns fell silent again.

Hours passed in this way. Tom and the soldier took turns creeping back down the shaky stairs to bring up food or stuff more

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wood into the stove. Nobody came near the battered store, although the American cavalry were constantly passing in and out of the ruined hamlet and a battery of light artillery had gone into action in a field only a short distance behind it.

"Anything happened?" Tom asked, as he came back from his third trip to the stove.

"Our chaps are dismounting and building intrenchments," answered the soldier, without turning from the window; then, with a sudden ring of excitement in his voice, "No, sir; they're falling back."

Tom hurried to the window. It was true; the masses of American horsemen were all falling slowly back toward the fringe of the city, the long lines were folding up into close-packed columns, the scattering dots of outposts were scurrying in toward the main body. Yet those troopers who had commenced intrenching themselves went on with their work.

And as the Americans began to fall back the distant masses of the Blue horse crept cautiously closer. Evidently the hostile horsemen could not believe in their apparent good fortune. A way seemed being made for them

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in exactly the direction in which they wanted to go.

Tom kept running from window to window, watching now the retreat of one side, now the advance of the other. Once or twice little clouds of Blues tried to push forward at a swifter pace, but each one of these attempts roused the American batteries into action, and the overbearing horsemen scattered before the wicked wreaths of smoke that marked the bursting shrapnel.

"They've got to muzzle them guns first," muttered the infantryman. "You can't walk up to guns with cavalry, not even in this craziest of all crazy wars!"

"A lot of men are coming this way—men on foot!" Tom called out from his window.

The soldier gave a long whistle. "Look again," he said. "See if they ain't cavalry on foot. You can tell by their puttees and the yellow trimmings."

"They're cavalry, all right," Tom answered, after a short inspection. "They're going into the houses and hiding in the long grass. Why, it's full of them out back here!"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE soldier had leaped to his feet and was fairly hugging himself with delight. "If it works!" he whispered. "If it only works!"

Tom looked at him in perplexity. "It's a trap," explained the infantryman—"a trap with those batt'ries for bait. Just watch."

Without wasting any precious moments in delay the Blue batteries commenced to clear the ground for the advance of the horse, and at once a tremendous shell-fire was being poured upon the American batteries which the cavalry had left behind them.

It was not an equal fight. There were three Blue guns to one American, but it seemed to Tom that the latter were not even doing what they could. From his perch in the window he could watch two or three of the batteries, and could see that, although they were actually suffering from the enemy's fire, they were not replying to it very vigorously.

"They're smelling the bait!" the soldier said, hoarsely. "They're smelling it!"

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One or two of the American batteries actually tried to shift ground under fire—a daring and almost foolhardy manoeuvre, very seldom attempted—and were badly knocked about in consequence. The fire from the American guns became less and less, finally died away altogether.

Still the Blue guns hammered away at the empty fields, intent on making sure that their opponents' batteries had been thoroughly silenced. Luckily, they did not seem to think the little cluster of houses worth their attention. The cautious, crawling return of the dismounted cavalrymen had escaped their attention.

Now the distant masses of horse were changing their formation, opening out, then wheeling into close columns and trotting forward. Across the distant fields came a line of galloping dots, pricking this way and that. Occasionally they would halt, scurry here and there; bugle-calls would sound faintly; then they would spur forward again.

"If them chaps below can hang onto their nerves," breathed the soldier, "it may happen. One little measly shot and the thing's spoiled."

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Doubtless it was the lure of the abandoned American batteries which finally turned the trick and set the whole huge mass of horsemen in motion. Nearer and nearer they came, and now Tom could see the dull light glinting from the scabbards, sabers, and lance-points of the scattered line of single riders which was combing the country-side like a human rake in front of the massed squadrons behind them.

With splendid craft the Americans played the last trick in the huge game of deceit. A few of the horsemen who had first dismounted—perhaps a couple of troops, all told—had continued to burrow away at the intrenchment they had commenced. Now, at a signal, they dropped their work, scampered in all directions, remounted the horses which had been held for them in a little wooded hollow back of the tiny village, and went scurrying off toward the city.

It was the one thing needed. The advanced riders of the Blues came clattering into the village almost on the heels of the fugitives. Tom saw many of the uniforms that he had seen that night in Cold Creek—the leather helmets, the broad slouch-hats—

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and there were new and strange ones—big lancers in dark red, Hussars in brown.

A brief flicker of these bright colors, then the ground began to shake and tremble to the thundering tramp of hundreds of steel-shod hoofs. One instant the head of the great column was bearing down on the little cross-roads, the men shouting, the officer at their head pointing his shining sword toward the deserted guns of the abandoned batteries.

The next instant the same officer had hurled his horse back onto its haunches, his sword clattered to the road, and his hand shot into the air. A bugler, riding a few paces behind him, raised his bugle and sounded the "halt" frantically.

Even as he did so every fence corner, dry ditch, gully, and patch of bushes shot fire. From a hundred points the slender bullets of the Springfields whizzed and bit deep into the packed mass of the horsemen.

For a minute it was a wild tangle of men and horses. The mass of those behind pushed forward; the front ranks—or those of them who had not gone down under the first hail of fire—tried to fall back.

Wild-eyed men came clattering up the

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stairs, rushed to the windows, and commenced firing down into the awful tangle of men and horses underneath.

Everything that Tom had been through in these last wild days paled beside the horror of this. He crouched in a corner, unable to bear the sight under the windows. He saw the soldier with whom he had been hiding all day, a revolver in his hand, firing out the open window and yelling wildly.

Bugles shrilled madly outside the shell of the building, men's voices, bellowing orders, carried high above the rattle of rifles, the clash of steel, and the screaming of the wounded horses. Then heavy blows began crashing against the lower part of the building; the whole flimsy framework of it trembled.

"They're getting in below," some one shouted. "Get to the top of the stairs and hold them off!"

Once Tom heard the voice of his late companion. "They're going to break through in spite of it!" the infantryman was yelling. "They ain't men; they're devils!"

Tom could see little of the hand-to-hand fight on the staircase, although he could have reached out his hand and touched some

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of the combatants. He did not need to watch. He knew that the Blues would win, that the little handful of Americans would never be able to hold them off.

He crawled toward a corner, with some idea of hiding and lying in the wrecked store after the tide of the fight had urged on toward the city and left him, but even as he did so there was a rush, a deafening roar of pistol-shots at the very top of the stairs, and the room filled with the hostile horsemen.

Tom caught a glimpse of bearded, swarthy faces through the smoke, saw a flash of steel, a big dragoon's saber swinging toward him. He dodged instinctively, but the blow did not fall, and he looked up to see that one of the men in the leather helmets had thrust the butt of a lance between him and the descending blade and was saying something to the man who had struck.

A couple of the Blue troopers seized him, bound his hands behind his back, and hurried him down the stairs. They seemed in great good spirits and kept repeating some remark over and over again, looking at him and laughing.

The store was thick with smoke and filled

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with fallen men. The street outside was a never-to-be-forgotten sight. It looked like a painting of the famous sunken road on the field of Waterloo that Tom had seen in the back of a history at home.

It did not seem possible that the craftily laid trap had failed, and yet one glance told Tom that such was the case. In spite of the slaughter that had occurred in the first few minutes the Blues had rallied, driven their horses into the village, fought their way from house to house and room to room, cleared the clustered houses of the Americans, and now, in answer to the blaring bugles, they were reforming their lines to meet the attack of the American cavalry—sweeping back to a supposedly easy triumph over the broken squadrons of the foe!

Of the great cavalry fight which followed Tom saw little. The man who held him had evidently lost his horse and was making his way to the rear on foot, looking for a fresh mount. Afterward Tom learned that the American cavalry had covered themselves with glory, and that only their smaller numbers had prevented a victory. He saw nothing but great flying masses of horsemen,

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surging lines that swayed this way and that, broke into groups, swung back together. Riderless horses dashed past him; fresh troops, roaring up at a gallop, threatened to ride him and his captor down. Once even they crouched in a ditch while a flying rush of light-horse actually went over their heads.

Dimly Tom realized that the fight was drifting toward the city, that the edge of it was actually clear of the ruined cross-roads hamlet, and that dismounted men were already busy about the captured guns.

He was jerked out of the ditch and swung up onto the back of a bay horse, his captor leaping into the saddle behind him.

"Pittsfield!" the Blue trooper bellowed into his ear with a good-natured grin. "Pittsfield—yes!"

All round them the Blue forces, rallying from victory as steadily as from defeat, were again forming line and column. Officers dashed this way and that, buglers blew themselves black in the face.

Tom, his senses reeling, found himself in the center of a mass of big bearded men who grinned at him cheerfully and shouted at him in their incomprehensible tongue. One

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or two of them called to him in English, but Tom was too utterly spent and wretched to answer. In a feeble way he realized that he was in no danger, that the great mass of horsemen was in motion again, and that the trooper behind him was shoving a blanket under him.

His senses seemed leaving him, but when the cavalry broke into a trot the sharp jolting seemed to arouse him, and he was acutely conscious of all that went on.

He saw the great cloud of cavalry of which he formed an unwilling part sweeping across the flat country toward the city. He knew what would happen. They would run into the awful fire from the inner line and go down as they had gone down under the fire of the handful in the ruined houses. Well, it would be some comfort to know that it would be American bullets that would put an end to this strange dream into which his life had turned.

They must be close to the inner line now. Why weren't the batteries firing? Surely it was not too dark for the gunners to see this great cloud of horsemen! Perhaps they were only waiting for them to get close. What

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a crash it would be when the volleys came! A strange feeling of elation surged through him. He whirled about and shouted into the face of the trooper who carried him:

"You'll get it in a minute now!"

The trooper stared, then laughed, and shouted something to the men about him which made all of them laugh loudly and look at Tom.

A cold fear gripped Tom's heart, and a big lump came into his throat. He began to understand why there were no fierce volleys slashing out at the cavalry, why the very guns that he had seen dragged into position the night before were not booming.

The cavalry thundered over a bridge, spurred up a short, slight slope—and the horses' hoofs clattered on pavement! Tom looked about him; they were passing through a great mass of battered houses whose walls had been loopholed for rifles, littered trenches, gun-pits where the abandoned guns were knocked this way and that. They were passing through that unbreakable inner line without firing a shot.

There must have been a time when Tom's senses left him, for he had no recollection of

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passing through the outlying parts of the city, although he was dimly conscious of the incessant jolting of the horse and the noise of the men's advance.

He came to himself suddenly in the midst of a great shouting. They were almost in the heart of the city. The great clock-face in the court-house tower blinked in the November twilight above his head. He looked about him. Everywhere, in the streets, on the sidewalks, on the steps of the buildings, were the Blues, waving their weapons, shouting for joy.

A great sob shook Tom from head to foot. Pittsfield was in the hands of the Blues!

CHAPTER XXVII

BEFORE Tom's sadly bewildered wits had had time to commence struggling with the question of what the Blues might do with him he felt a knife slashing at the cords which bound his wrists, and the next moment he had been lifted none too gently to the ground.

The big trooper was grinning down at him from under the vizor of his great helmet, the same look of heavy good nature on his dark bearded face. "Haya!" he cried, with a wave of the hand. "Haya!"

The word was incomprehensible enough, but there was no mistaking the meaning of the gesture. As far as the big trooper who had captured him was concerned, Tom might go where he liked.

Without waiting for a second invitation Tom scurried to the side of the road, for the center of the street, full of the Blue soldiers, was no safe place for an American boy very close to the edge of complete exhaustion.

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Once free of the danger of being trampled under foot, Tom could not forego looking back at the hurrying mass of the conquerors. He knew that he ought to be filled with feelings of the most bitter hate; that he ought to want to fly at these foreign invaders and tear at them with his bare hands.

Yet somehow it was impossible to hate the Blues. They did not act like a conquering army; they acted like a lot of boys released from school. They shouted and sang, called back and forth to one another, and laughed like so many children, but there was no disorder, no indications of the dreaded "straggling"—bad enough in the open country, but horrible inside captured towns.

For the first time Tom became aware that others besides himself were watching the strange spectacle. The street was lined with people, silent, white-faced, motionless. Here and there men raised their fists and shook them at the Blues, who only laughed and waved their hands in reply. Once or twice some man in the crowd, half-maddened by rage and humiliation, would dash out and throw himself at one of the troopers.

It was not a pleasant sight to watch, and

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Tom dragged himself out of the crowd, turned down a dark side-street, and began to walk mechanically in the direction of home.

He had no real purpose. He did not know whether the house would be standing or not. There must have been a bombardment during those long hours that he was hiding in the culvert or watching the cavalry fight from the ruined store.

What had happened to the rest of the civilian laborers who had been drawn into the field by that hurried, desperate conscription he had no idea. Jack might be lying anywhere along the broken lines of the inner rampart. His father and Mr. Ranney might be at home, or they might have been caught up by another levy of the inhabitants.

Tom followed the familiar turnings with the same homing instinct that directs birds and animals. There was no other place for him to go. He was thoroughly sickened of the sight of armed men and the sounds of combat. He wanted to get away from all of them, get away and sleep. He did not feel sick, though he wondered dully why he was not, only terribly tired and sleepy.

Slowly it began to dawn upon him that

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the quarter of the city through which he was making his way had not suffered from any bombardment. It was empty and deserted; almost all of the houses were dark, and there was nobody in the street, but the pavements were not torn full of holes, and the houses showed no effects of shell-fire.

He turned the corner into his own street and commenced to run, whimpering like a child as he did. He was almost afraid to look up, afraid that the house would be dark and deserted and that he would have to spend the night alone in the captured city.

When he reached the house and looked up he could not help crying out. There was a light at the rear of the house, and two or three in the windows up-stairs. Somebody was there! After all these hours he was going to be able to look at a familiar face—and Tom felt that after that nothing would really matter greatly.

He hurried up the steps and tried the door. It was locked, and for an instant he forgot the latch-key in his pocket. His hands shook so that he could hardly fit it into the lock, but he finally succeeded, and the door swung open.

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There was a faint light in the hall, but the other rooms were in darkness. Tom hurried through and opened the door into the kitchen.

He stopped short in the doorway, staring at the three figures grouped around the gas-stove. They had evidently not heard him and did not look up as he opened the door.

Jack, one arm in a sling, was stirring something over the stove. Mr. Ranney, his overcoat and hat on, was grinding coffee. Tom's father stood staring out of the window into the back yard. Tom would hardly have known him. His face was drawn and haggard; there were deep circles under his eyes. He looked a dozen years older than when Tom had seen him last—not two days before!

"Father!" Tom called, with a catch in his voice.

Jack's spoon went clattering to the floor, Mr. Ranney dropped the handle of the coffee-mill as though it had been red-hot, and Tom's father spun around on his heel.

"My boy!" he said, brokenly. "My boy!"

For a few minutes they were like a lot of wild people. Tom and Jack were both crying, and the two men were not far from it. Mr. Blakesley seemed to look younger, and

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the lines began to go out of his face like magic.

"Here, everybody," Mr. Ranney called out, happily, "we've got to celebrate somehow. I'll go down and jack up that furnace fire. We've been so miserable, Tom, we haven't cared about being warm! And we'll eat everything there is in the house, and then we'll sit down and talk everything over and make a night of it!"

A sudden thought leaped into Tom's mind, and the sudden feeling of happiness was shattered.

"But the Blues—" he commenced.

All three of them interrupted him with a shout. Mr. Ranney had already started down the cellar stairs, but he popped his gray head back into the room to say:

"Never you mind the Blues. We don't care what they're doing or where they are. Your father and I are both ruined, like as not, and a thousand other men besides. But what do we care? We've got our boys back, and we know our wives are safe. So what does anything else matter, I'd like to know?"

It seemed to Tom that nothing had ever felt so good as the hot water in the bath-tub.

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Twice while he was paddling and splashing around in the tub he fell asleep, and he would never have climbed out if Jack hadn't come hammering on the door with the announcement that supper was ready.

They gathered in the dining-room, where Jack, who seemed able to do a great many things with one hand, already had the table set. Mr. Ranney ran in and out the swing-door, carrying in bacon, eggs, bread and butter, and a huge steaming pot of coffee.

"Now," he commanded, "everybody pitch in, and not a word out of any of you, except, 'Please pass the butter!' or something like that, until every dish is scraped clean!"

They obeyed him literally, laughing at one another merrily as the piles of bread and bacon and the great platter full of fried eggs disappeared.

At last Mr. Ranney pushed back his chair. "I quit," he announced. "I would have eaten another egg if there'd been one, but I won't cook another for myself or anybody else."

The others expressed themselves as "full up," and all the chairs were pushed back, while the two men lighted their cigars.

"I want to hear what happened here,

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first," Tom said, "because I guess my story's longer."

"Nothing's happened here," answered his father. "Mr. Ranney and I've been living here like a couple of hermits. We were worried enough when Jack came back here last night with a sprained wrist and said he hadn't seen you for hours."

"I got hit with a brick," Jack explained, "and they let me off when they found I couldn't do anything. I didn't see you at all after you began talking to that soldier."

"And now, Tom, you can have the floor!" commanded Mr. Ranney.

Tom began at the beginning of things and omitted no details. When he came to the account of the great cavalry fight his three hearers began staring at him as though they thought he had lost his senses.

"Now wait a minute, Tom," Mr. Ranney interrupted, laying down his cigar, "let's get the straight of this. Describe this interurban crossing again, will you?"

Tom told them, as near as he could, the appearance and make-up of the little village where he and the infantryman had hidden and warmed themselves.

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"That's Tutwill's Crossing," exclaimed Mr. Ranney, "and no mistake! There's not another place around Pittsfield that fits into Tom's description."

Something stirred in Tom's memory.

"You're right, Mr. Ranney," he said. "I think I saw a name something like that over the door of the waiting-room."

Mr. Ranney nodded rapidly several times. "I knew it," he exclaimed, "but Tutwill's Crossing, Tom, isn't more than two miles from the inner line. Such a force of cavalry as you describe couldn't have got a yard closer to the city without being wiped out."

"Well, all I know is that they did," Tom maintained, stoutly, "and what's more, one of them carried me into Pittsfield on his horse!"

The two men and Jack were on their feet.

"Into Pittsfield!" cried Mr. Blakesley.

Mr. Ranney looked at Tom, then turned to his father. "Better put him to bed and see if you can get a doctor, I guess," he said, in a low tone. "He's been through too much for a boy to stand in the last two days."

Tom shook his head almost savagely. "I'm not out of my head," he cried. "The city's

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full of the Blues this minute. Main Street is packed with 'em. Why, this trooper put me off his horse right in front of the court-house!"

For a minute the three were perfectly speechless with amazement.

"But there's been no bombardment!" protested Mr. Ranney.

"It was quiet all last night," added Mr. Blakesley, "and all the firing to-day was on the south. It's been more quiet in other directions than it has for a week past."

Mr. Ranney was already getting into his hat and coat. "Don't like to seem to doubt your word, Tom," he said, "but I've got to see this to believe it."

CHAPTER XXVIII

HALF an hour later Mr. Ranney came back looking very sober. He took off his things in the hall and climbed up-stairs without a word. "It's true enough," he said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "Pittsfield's full of them."

He sat staring at the floor, his hands locked between his knees.

"But the queerest thing of all," he continued, "is that there's not one of our soldiers to be seen. They're gone."

Mr. Blakesley shook his head slowly.

"These things don't sound reasonable at all," he protested. "First an army comes pouring into the city when it isn't humanly possible for them to do it. I know enough about war to know that the inner line couldn't have been carried by assault without first being knocked galley-west by a bombardment. And we know there hasn't been a bombardment. Why, if they'd opened on the defenses

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with heavy guns, it would have knocked this part of the city into kindling-wood!"

"And what's more," spoke Mr. Ranney, "the first troops into Pittsfield were Blue cavalry! And that's about the last degree of impossibility."

"You can call that chance, I suppose," answered Tom's father. "They didn't start with any idea of getting in. They pushed ahead after our cavalry had been routed, found the way unexpectedly open, and just kept on."

"But why was the way open?" Jack put in.

"That's the question!" exclaimed Mr. Ranney. "Why was the way open, and what's become of the American army? You can't make forty or fifty thousand men disappear like magic!"

Tom had been trying to put two and two together, trying to couple what he had seen with what he had heard, and make the whole thing into a reasonable explanation. He suddenly remembered what the infantryman had said as they peered out of the broken window of the little grocery. "I know what it means!" he announced, suddenly.

The others stared at him.

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"It was intended that the Blues should get in," Tom hurried on. "Don't you see, it's much easier to let them into Pittsfield and bottle them up there than it would have been to try to keep them out. Once they're in, they can't do anything more. And if we'd tried to hold them out another day or so, maybe they would have bombarded the city."

Mr. Ranney stood looking at Tom over the top of his glasses, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Tom," he said, "I guess they've made a soldier of you in two days' time! That's a perfectly logical explanation—and it's the one that 'll fit."

"I didn't think it out," confessed Tom, and told them of what the infantryman had said.

"Did you ever hear of anything so queer?" Mr. Ranney broke out. "Here's an invading army, dropped down into the center of this country, whips our field forces through superior numbers more than anything else, takes the city it's started out to capture, and then stops. Usually the fall of a city means a great victory for the attacking force. This time, as sure as you live, it means utter defeat!"

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"It certainly does," agreed Mr. Blakesley. "If the Blues had stopped two or three days ago, faced around and tried to cut their way out in some direction, there would have been a bare chance of success. Now they're lost!"

For half an hour they talked over the amazing situation, then gave it up and went to bed. Tom slept fourteen hours and did not wake up until late the following morning.

Then for two days Pittsfield was to all intents and purposes a Blue city. The metropolis itself and half a dozen of the suburbs were occupied by the invaders. The army of defense seemed to have vanished.

Inside the city they knew nothing of the events that occurred outside, although they could guess at some of them. They did not know that for those two days the entire civilized world stood fairly thunderstruck at the spectacle of a conquering army absolutely lost in the midst of an invaded country. Half a dozen neutral countries attempted to patch up a truce between the hostile powers. It was apparent that the Blue invasion had failed hopelessly, and that to persist in the war could mean only the complete destruction of the splendid force.

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Neither did the inhabitants of Pittsfield guess that a second Blue fleet had appeared off the Atlantic coast and that there were rumors of a second and greater invasion.

It was not possible that the commanders of the Blue army in Pittsfield received any information of the presence of this second fleet, although their subsequent actions indicated that they did. The truth probably was that the presence of the fleet was a part of the plan of campaign which had been mapped out before the beginning of hostilities. That the leaders of the lost army knew that the fleet *must* be there, because it had all been decided beforehand.

The inmates of the Blakesley house spent those two strange days for the most part indoors. Occasionally they went out to see what was going on in that part of town which was occupied by the enemy. But, however easy-going the invaders had appeared when they first entered the city, their manner had undergone a change. The inhabitants of Pittsfield might do as they pleased in those quarters of town which were unoccupied, but an unbroken chain of sentries shut them

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off from the Blue quarter. It might have been another part of the world.

"They'll give up," Mr. Ranney kept repeating; "they'll give up. They can't do anything else."

It was late in the afternoon of the second day, and all four of them were moving restlessly about the house, wondering what would happen next, when they heard in the street outside the unmistakable throb of drums.

All of them rushed to the windows and looked out. The street directly in front of the house was empty, but far down it they could see the head of a dense column moving toward them.

"The surrender must have taken place!" exclaimed Mr. Ranney.

"I don't think so," objected Tom's father. "They wouldn't come this way if they were going to give up their arms."

Nearer and nearer came the hammering drums, and presently, rank after rank, the Blue infantry began to tramp past the house. There was no disorder, no haste. The marching Blues looked as fit, as cheerful, as confident as they had when Tom and Jack had

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watched them stalking through Cold Creek in the early days of the great campaign.

"Beaten or not," exclaimed Mr. Blakesley, "they're wonderful troops. I don't think the earth has seen such an army since the last of the Roman legions vanished."

Hour after hour the troops streamed by in an unbroken column, infantry for the most part, broken sometimes by artillery, but never a cavalryman. The city was emptying itself.

"North they're heading," Mr. Blakesley said. "Yes, that's logical. There must be fewer of our men in that direction than in any other. It's the easiest way out."

From a hundred other points that cold afternoon men, women, and children were watching the commencement of what was one day to be known as the Great Retreat. Little did they guess, as they looked at the vanishing columns of the Blue army, that the greatest military achievement of the war was yet to be accomplished, and little did Tom Blakesley think that he had not yet seen the last of the Blues.

Almost on the heels of the retreating foe came the first of the relieving army, and,

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almost as soon as the soldiers themselves, many of the inhabitants of Pittsfield who had fled from the city came streaming back in.

The railroads began to run a train or two, linesmen were everywhere repairing wires, and news from the outside world began to trickle into the city that had been cut off for so long.

There could be no doubt of the fate of the Blue army. Of course, no one knew exactly how large the army was. In the first days it had been estimated at more than two hundred thousand. But it had paid heavily for its victories, it had been forced to leave many of its wounded—even the slightly wounded which an army usually takes with it—behind, and it had no place for stragglers.

It was heading into a hostile country, a country, moreover, that it had marched through once and left well stripped of the supplies without which an army cannot live.

Behind it, on its flanks, in front of it the American forces were closing in. More than a quarter of a million brown-clad troops were drawing around in an ever-narrowing circle of steel. Its fate was a matter of days—perhaps of hours.

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Still, not more than thirty-six hours after the last Blue soldier lifted his feet from the pavements of Pittsfield and plunged into the mud of the country roads, came word that the fangs of the enemy had not been drawn, by any means.

The Blues had struck at the forces directly in front of them, struck with the same strength they had shown in the earlier battles, and actually broken through the Brown lines. For the moment they had slipped through the tightening noose of the rope.

A week passed, during which the papers every day were full of the reports of incessant fighting. The Blue army, marching north and east in a desperate effort to reach the coast, no longer boasted an unbroken series of victories. Instead of a country paralyzed by broken communications they were now marching through a land where the news of their movements went before them. They could no more count upon superior numbers.

One running fight after another took place. Twenty miles from Pittsfield the Blues were beaten in a rear-guard fight and more than three thousand of them taken prisoner.

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A day later they were caught between the jaws of the trap a second time, and four thousand more were lost.

Immediately after this all fear of a second invasion was dissipated by a report sent broadcast over the country from New York City. The second Blue fleet had been found to consist almost entirely of transports and had been easily scattered. The retreating Blue army was now stripped of its last hope. Even should it achieve the seemingly impossible and reach the coast, there would be no fleet there to meet it.

As soon as the wires were repaired telegrams and telephone messages had flown back and forth between Pittsfield and Bradley. Tom and Jack had talked with their mothers, and a day had been set for the return of Mrs. Blakesley and Mrs. Ranney to the city.

"No, sir," Mrs. Blakesley had said over the telephone to her husband, "we will not go in an auto. One trip of that sort is enough."

CHAPTER XXIX

SO, bright and early the next morning, Tom and Jack set out for the station. It had been decided that the two boys should make the trip without their fathers. Both Mr. Blakesley and Mr. Ranney were working thirteen or fourteen hours a day trying to get the tangled affairs of their business straightened out.

There was no question of safety now. Bradley was not in the line of the Blue retreat. The country was full of American soldiers, and there was no possible danger. Even if the two boys had not been "through the mill" with a vengeance, they could have undertaken the trip without hesitation.

As the north-bound train pulled out of the big station Tom spread out the latest edition of one of the morning papers.

"Look, Jack!" he exclaimed, as his eye caught the flaring head-lines. "It's as good as over!"

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Eagerly they read the large print of the front page. There was no longer any doubt of it; the great Blue army was almost a thing of the past.

"The Blue retreat," they read, "has been even more wonderful than the Blue advance—fit to rank alongside the most famous marches of history. Napoleon's Grand Army retreating from Moscow had greater difficulties to combat in the way of natural obstructions, but was not constantly subjected to the attacks of superior forces."

The Blue army, the account went on, had split into some six or seven divisions, lightened its baggage, fought by day and fled by night. One division, surrounded and captured near the New York State line, had actually marched seventy-eight miles in four days!

At the familiar station of Cold Creek—which still bore many traces of the enemy's occupation—the boys secured a Buffalo paper which contained even later accounts than those they had read.

Across the top of the page ran a single line of great black letters:

"The Lost Army!"

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Underneath this heading were accounts of the engagements of which the boys had already learned, and of others which had occurred since.

As an army the great Blue host had passed out of existence. A few scattered troops of cavalry had made temporary escapes. One or two forces of some considerable size were still holding out against the immensely superior American armies which surrounded them, and their capture or destruction was only a question of time.

But one entire body of men had vanished as though the earth had opened and swallowed them!

That a force consisting (according to the estimates of the American officers) of some eight hundred infantry, two regiments of horse—numbering in all perhaps fifteen hundred men—and a battery of field-guns could vanish in a thickly settled country, scoured in every direction by the forces of our armies, seems incredible, yet such appears to be the case.

The fact that the missing cavalry comprise the famous Brown Hussars and "Leather Helmets," as the dragoons have been called, is pretty thoroughly established, as none of these troopers have been taken in any of the numerous engagements of the past few hours.

The infantry are probably *chasseurs*, whose slouch-

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hats have been only too familiar sights during the latter days of the war.

News of the capture of this force is expected hourly, although their exact whereabouts are still a matter of conjecture.

There followed half a dozen interviews with people supposed to know the situation pretty thoroughly, and each one had located the lost army in a different place.

"Wouldn't it be great if we could find 'em, Tom?" Jack asked.

Tom shrugged his shoulders. "Go ahead and hunt for 'em, if you want to," he invited. "I've seen all I want of the Blues."

"But where do you suppose they are?" Jack persisted.

"How should I know?" replied Tom. "Probably caught by this time. Like enough we'll read all about it in Bradley to-night."

Jack was silent for a time, then spoke again. "It's funny to think of more'n a thousand men lost and with no place they really want to go," he remarked, thoughtfully. "Just think of it, Tom! They're as bad off as we thought we were that morning after the Blues left us at that deserted farm-house—

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only they don't dare go and ask for anything to eat!"

"Well, if they can't eat they won't do much fighting, or running, either," Tom said.

There was a sudden grinding of brakes, and the train came to a lurching, pumping stop.

Jack flattened his face against the window. "Didn't know there was a station here," he said; then, after looking as far as he could in either direction, "There isn't, either—not so much as a watering-tank!"

"This is a poky train," Tom replied. "Probably they're going to shove us onto a side-track to let some other train by."

"But there isn't any side-track!" objected Jack. "Not a sign of one."

A brakeman came hurrying through the car, and the boys asked him why they had stopped.

"Wash-out, I guess," he called back over his shoulder.

They left the car and walked up toward the engine. There, sure enough, fifty yards or so in front of the engine's fender, was a place where a hard rain during the night had washed out the tracks. The ties had sunk,

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and several lengths of rail were so badly twisted out of place that there was no running over them with an engine.

Owing to the uncertain condition of the tracks in every direction every train during these days carried a sort of wrecking-crew, and there would not be much delay. By the time Tom and Jack reached the scene men were already busy with shovels and crow-bars.

"How long will they be?" Tom asked the conductor.

That official was short-tempered. His train was late already, and the prospect of further delay did not please him.

"'N hour, maybe more!" he snapped.

The prospect of spending an hour in the stuffy coach or watching the uninteresting efforts of the men repairing the track did not appeal to the boys at all, and Jack's suggestion that they "prowl around a bit" was acted upon instantly.

The wash-out lay in a straight stretch of track between two deep cuts, and the boys walked back to the cut behind them and scrambled up its steep side. From the top they had a good view of the country—a dis-

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trict quite different from the flat, level stretches that surrounded the city.

Knobby hills, some of them wooded, others brown and bare, rose on every side of them, and the railroad-track curved and twisted this way and that, seeking the easiest way through.

"I'll bet it's full of rabbits down in that hollow," Jack said. "Let's go down and jump on a few of those brush-piles. We've got loads of time."

They ran down the hill, scrambled through the barbed-wire fence, and entered the first patch of timber, where Jack had noticed several piles of brush. Jack jumped onto the first of them, while Tom stood by to watch results.

Sure enough, a second after Jack's feet had crashed down onto the top of the pile, out popped a rabbit, which went streaking off through the bushes at a great rate.

"He went into that next pile!" shouted Jack. "I'll bet we can get him!"

So they pulled one pile to pieces, found nothing, and attacked another. It never occurred to them to look at their watches, and they had not thought of the train until

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they were startled by several shrill toots of the engine's whistle.

"Cracky!" exclaimed Jack, dropping the club with which he had been poking into the pile of brush, "we'll have to leg it!"

They ran as fast as they could, and tumbled down the steep sides of the cut just as the first slow puffs of smoke were popping up into the air from the stack of the locomotive. Down the track they pounded, shouting at the top of their lungs, but the back platform of the rear coach was empty, and nobody heard them.

For a little time they gained, and Tom once got so close that he stretched out his hand to grasp the railing of the platform. But just as he did so the train commenced to gain speed. For ten heartbreaking seconds he just managed to keep up, neither gaining nor losing an inch; then, very slowly, the iron railing crept away from his clutching fingers.

CHAPTER XXX

THE two boys sat down on the cold steel rails and panted for breath. At first they laughed at themselves, then the funny side of their predicament disappeared completely.

"It's that old conductor's fault," growled Tom. "We weren't gone half an hour." Tom looked at his watch. "Just forty minutes," he said. "But, the conductor or not, I don't see that we're any better off because it wasn't our fault. Any idea where we are?"

"Let's see," Jack considered. "We went through Cold Creek half an hour ago, didn't we? And Cold Creek's just about half-way between Bradley and the city. 'Bout ten miles from Bradley, I guess. What do you think?"

"Just about that," decided Tom, "and nothing to do but walk."

They started forlornly down the long stretch of track. The man who had laid it had evidently had no thought of "hoboes" and other

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unfortunates who might be driven to walk the track, for there were deep spaces between the ties, and walking them was nothing short of torture.

"None of that for me!" announced Jack. "Let's strike across country till we hit a road. Like enough we can get a lift."

Without wasting any time they left the railroad, crossed the fence, and plunged into the timber. The country was even rougher than they had guessed from the glimpse they had caught from the top of the cut. They stumbled up one hill and down another, dodged around dense thickets, scrambled through little marshes hidden in pockets of the hills, and crossed two or three streams. At the end of half an hour's hard climbing and walking they were still making their way through heavy timber, and they had seen neither a road nor a piece of cultivated ground, save one lonely field given over to celery and onions.

"I know where we are now," Tom said, as they sat down on a flat rock to look around them, after clambering up a hill that seemed as steep as the side of a house, "we're in the Big Swamp!"

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"Whatever that is!" commented Jack.

"Grandfather Blakesley's told me about it," Tom went on. "They used to hunt turkeys and deer here when he was a boy. There are a few of 'em left even now."

"All right," answered Jack, "but where is it?"

"About twelve miles from Bradley," answered Tom. "It's part of a chain of swamps that comes in from the Great Lakes. It isn't all swamp, of course, but that's what they call it."

At the end of another fifteen minutes Jack exclaimed, suddenly:

"It must be a hundred miles wide, isn't it?"

"Not more than three or four," answered Tom; then he stood with his jaw dropped, staring at something ahead of him with so startled an expression that Jack whirled to see what it was. There was nothing in sight but the same prospect of scrubby trees, bushes, rocks, and dead leaves.

"What's the matter?" demanded Jack. "See a ghost?"

"No," replied Tom, "but we passed that dead tree over there twenty minutes ago. We've been going in a circle!"

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"Oh, I guess not," answered Jack. "I've seen a million dead trees that looked just like it."

"I'll prove it," Tom promised. "There's a mass of sticky black mud right near it. I stepped in it when we passed it the first time. Come on!"

They walked over to the dead tree. There was the black mud, and there, in the very center of it, a footprint into which Tom's shoe fitted exactly.

They did what they could to get their directions straightened, then moved ahead very slowly and cautiously, keeping themselves straight by keeping two trees in line until they reached the first of them, then taking a line to a fresh object.

"I smell smoke!" Tom said, suddenly.

"Thought I did a ways back," admitted Jack, "but I wouldn't say anything, because I thought maybe I imagined it."

"Smoke means a farm-house," Tom decided. "Farmers haven't had any time to burn brush, but somehow that smells like a bonfire."

They went ahead at a faster pace, Tom leading the way. He came to the top of a



THE BOYS HID BEHIND A TREE AND PEEPED AT THE DISTANT FIGURE

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little ridge and stopped short. Through a rough sort of aisle through the trees he could plainly see the figure of a man—a man in a long coat, with a queer-shaped head, and something over his shoulder that might be a gun.

Tom halted his companion by a gesture, and the two boys hid themselves behind a tree and peered at the distant figure. For a time they could not see him clearly enough to make out any details, but presently he moved, and they saw clearly enough the carbine over his shoulder and the glitter of brass trimmings on his leather helmet.

"We've found 'em!" Jack said, in a whisper. "We've found the lost army!"

It seemed incredible. The Big Swamp was entirely out of the direction taken by the main line of the Great Retreat. Yet one thing was certain: the Big Swamp was an excellent place of concealment. An army of thousands might have plunged into it and remained hidden for days.

"Maybe it's just a few stragglers," suggested Jack. "Let's see if we can crawl closer."

It was not difficult to move noiselessly through the woods, for the ground was cov-

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ered with leaves which had been thoroughly soaked by the fall rains, and the boys could hardly hear each other's steps.

As they moved forward the smell of smoke became stronger and they could make out a bluish haze through the trees. They could hear faint sounds, too, so distant that they were not definite, but they were unmistakably caused by human beings, for there was no wind stirring.

Cautiously they edged forward until they got a nearer view of the sentry, then moved to one side and came uncomfortably close to a second. In whatever direction they moved they caught glimpses of these still figures among the tree-trunks.

"We ought to hear the horses," whispered Jack.

"They wouldn't try to take horses into such a place," answered Tom. "They've left 'em behind somewhere."

"What 'll we do?"

"Get to the road just as fast as we can. There must be some of our troops near. They're everywhere."

In their excitement they had come closer to the line of sentries than they had realized.

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They had not run a dozen steps, after making up their minds to hurry toward the road, when a man jumped from behind a big oak not more than fifty yards away from them, half raised his carbine, dropped it again, whistled shrilly through his teeth, and came pounding after them.

CHAPTER XXXI

"**R**UN!" gasped Jack. "He's after us." Tom took a few steps and then started to stop.

"He'll shoot!" he cried, as Jack tried to pull him along.

But Jack had caught the significance of the raised and lowered carbine. If the Blue sentry had wanted to shoot he could have done it easy enough then. The Blues were afraid to shoot lest the sound of their shots betray their hiding-place!

"No, he won't," Jack panted. "Come on!"

It seemed as though men were springing from every tree-trunk behind them. The woods were filled with the sound of hurrying feet; yet after the first shrill whistle of alarm the Blues did not make a sound. This silent pursuit was much more terrifying than if the Blues had been shouting at the top of their voices.

The boys had a start of perhaps fifty yards,

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and they were better equipped for running than their pursuers, burdened as the Blues were by their heavy boots and equipment. In a few minutes the sounds behind them ceased, and at the end of another burst of sprinting the pair stopped to listen and get their breath.

"They've quit," panted Jack, "and I thought they had us sure!"

"They haven't quit for good," answered Tom. "They'll stop us if they can. Next sight they get of us they'll shoot."

Before they had regained their breath the two boys began running again. It seemed to Tom that he had reached the limit of his endurance. His legs felt numb, his lungs seemed unable to fill themselves with air, and the blood hammered in his temples. Just as he was about to give up, that strange reserve force which every boy and every athlete knows as the "second wind" came to his aid. The numbness passed. In a second it seemed to him as though he could go on indefinitely.

In front of him the woods suddenly thinned out. In front of them stretched an expanse of black loam, a line of willows marking the

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course of a creek, and beyond that an unpainted house with blue smoke pouring out of its chimney.

Never had a house looked so good. The boys found a path across the boggy ground in front of them, and two minutes after they had left the woods they were tumbling over a rickety gate into a farm-yard where a gaunt man in overalls and a battered felt hat was hitching a horse to a buckboard.

At the sound behind him the man jumped three good inches off the ground and spun round like a top.

"Tarnation!" he exclaimed, as he caught sight of Jack and Tom, "you boys give me a scare. I thought 'twas some o' them Blues."

"They're back there in the swamp!" Tom shouted back.

"Who?" demanded the farmer.

"The lost army!" the two boys cried in the same breath.

The farmer stared at them blankly. "Huh?" he said.

Both the boys had forgotten that the man had probably not seen a newspaper for weeks, that the words 'lost army' meant nothing to him, that he might not even know that Pitts-

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field had fallen and been reoccupied by the Americans.

In broken, jerky sentences, one boy taking up the tale the instant the other completely lost his breath, they told him enough of what had happened and what they had seen to make him understand the situation.

"I swan!" he kept repeating. "I swan to goodness!"

But, astonished and frightened as he appeared to be, he kept on with his hitching even while the boys talked, and by the time he had got the gist of their story he jumped into the buckboard and picked up the lines.

"Dun'no' where the nearest soldiers be," he said, "but we'll sure find 'em. Jump up and ketch hold somewhere!"

Never had the two boys taken such a ride. The narrow road ran between strips of marshland or through thickets where the tangled growth came up to the wheel-tracks. Everywhere the mud was deep, and in places there would have been no getting through at all but for a "corduroy road" underneath. The logs of it were out of sight, but not out of feeling, and the buckboard jumped and plunged.

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Evidently the gaunt horse was used to heavy going, for he kept up a steady, space-devouring gait of which few horses would have been capable under the circumstances. The rickety vehicle creaked and cracked and groaned, but it held together somehow, and they came presently to higher ground and mud that was not quite so deep.

"Can't tell which way t' turn," admitted the farmer, as they came to a main-traveled road. "So'jers might be one way an' might be t'other. Gotta just take a chance," and he jerked the horse to the right.

Luck was with them. They had not driven a mile down the road when they almost ran into a patrol of American cavalry—half a dozen troopers in command of a young lieutenant.

He heard the boys' story with obvious disbelief.

"It probably was nothing more than a few stragglers," he said, "and you boys were frightened into thinking you saw ten times as many men as there really were."

"We didn't see more than a dozen," Tom answered, "but they had leather helmets on."

The officer straightened in his saddle.

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"The deuce they did!" he exclaimed. "Sure of that?"

Jack and Tom nodded their heads violently.

"Blake," snapped the lieutenant, "take three men and go with these boys. Hold your position unless you're forced to leave it. If they're there and they try to move, send one man back to Turner's, keep out of sight, and follow 'em."

He wheeled his horse and went pounding off up the road, the rest of his men galloping at his heels.

Blake, an old sergeant who looked as though he might have seen a dozen campaigns, questioned the boys and the farmer, snapping his queries out as fast as they were answered.

"How far over in the timber were they? Any horses? Any sign of guns?" Then he swung round on the farmer. "What's the easiest way out of that wilderness for a good-sized body of men?" he demanded.

"Two or three good roads runnin' straight through it south o' here," answered the farmer.

Sergeant Blake scowled. "They won't strike south," he said. "What's north?"

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"Ain't no road for better'n five miles," answered the farmer, "but there's a lane two miles from my place."

"That 'll be it!" exclaimed the cavalryman. "That's where they'll break cover."

Two of the troopers followed the farmer back to his house, with orders to keep an eye on the edge of the woods and to patrol them for half a mile in either direction. Sergeant Blake started off down the road toward the lane, leaving his horse tied to a fence.

"Come along, if you like," he said to the boys.

They had no difficulty in finding the lane, and took up their position in an alder thicket perhaps two hundred yards from the point where it ran into the road.

There they waited, for the most part in silence. Blake explained what would have to be done to gather enough men for the capture. There was still plenty of troops in the country; it was just a question of getting them together in a hurry.

"Ought to have mounted infantry for a trick like this," he said.

The minutes dragged on slowly. Tom stared down the dreary lane until his eyes

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ached and little black spots danced in front of them, but nothing moved. He had quite given up hope of seeing anything and was watching a big hawk circling overhead when Blake's fingers closed on his arm.

"Keep quiet, you two," he warned. "Our friends are coming."

CHAPTER XXXII

A SINGLE figure had appeared in the lane, unmistakable, even at a distance. He stood still for a few seconds, peering about him, then waved his arm.

The lane filled with men who seemed to have been waiting for this signal just out of sight in the shelter of the woods. There was no attempt at order. The men came out in a hurrying swarm, far different from the trim, dense columns in which the Blues usually moved.

"Not a gun, not a horse, not a stick of a wagon!" Blake muttered, under his breath, as he peered through the alders. "They were pinched pretty tight, boys!"

As soon as they reached the road the Blues turned unhesitatingly north. Far off as they were, the boys could see something of the lost army's condition. The men were fagged, dispirited, worn out. There had been a good deal of confusion in the last march through

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the woods, apparently, for Hussars, light infantry, and "Leather Helmets" were mixed together.

"I wonder how much they know of what's happened," mused Blake, as he watched. "They probably don't know that their southern army is just as bad off as they are, and that the naval attack on the Panama Canal has failed."

The two boys looked at their companion in surprise, but he shook his head in response to their demands for details.

"You can read all about that in the papers to-morrow. We've got something better than that to watch now."

Even in utter defeat, the Blues did not forget their usual caution. Before the twelve hundred men of the lost army were clear of the lane an advance-guard was detached from the main body and moved several hundred yards down the road at a sharp "double," flanking parties scurried off into the fields on both sides of the road, and a rear-guard, made up for the most part of light infantry, likewise broke off from the main force.

"Look at 'em!" Blake exclaimed in admiration. "Not one chance in a million, but

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doing the right things just as though they expected to win through!"

The three in the alders waited until the last of the Blues had vanished down the road, then Blake jumped to his feet and hurried toward his waiting horse, the two boys at his heels.

As he vaulted into the saddle he called back to them:

"If you boys want to see the last of the Blues, strike straight west. The lost army won't be more than a name inside a few hours."

Tired as they were, neither Jack nor Tom had any idea of doing anything else. Before Blake was out of sight they were trudging straight west, and before they had walked a mile they realized why their soldier friend had told them to go in this direction. To the west the ground sloped upward rapidly from the Big Swamp, with its stretches of gaunt marsh and clusters of knobby hills. The road which the lost army had taken followed the lower level, and, because of the nature of the ground, winding and twisting more than the road on the higher level which the boys were following.

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They did not talk much, partly because they were too tired to waste strength in that way and partly because they were rather sobered by the thought of what they were likely to see within the next few hours. There was no longer any thrill of excitement in the mere possibility of battle; that had come to be an old story to them. But this was likely to be the last battle of the war! It was a hard thing to believe after all these weeks, and, strangely enough, both boys nursed a secret sympathy for the forlorn column of tattered figures trudging toward certain fate down there in the valley road.

Tom remembered descriptions he had read of the last stand of the Old Guard at Waterloo. He had never liked those descriptions, because it seemed too great a pity that so fine a body of men should have to fight their last fight. Yet here was just as splendid a body of troops about to go down in their final defeat—and he was going to see it!

"There they are!" Jack cried, suddenly.

Sure enough, far below them were the Blues, no bigger than the lead soldiers Tom had once played with on the nursery floor. Even at the distance the boys could see that

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the intervals between advance-guard, main body, and rear-guard had been preserved, and that the busy flankers were still scampering about on both sides of the column, feeling their way forward on the last steps of their famous march as cautiously as on the first.

A clatter of hoofs sounded behind them, and they turned to see the familiar face of the young lieutenant, riding at the side of an older officer, a troop of cavalry clattering behind them, a few guns bumping along in the rear of the horsemen.

The lieutenant saluted and said something to his superior, who drew in his horse and looked sharply at the two boys standing by the side of the road.

"I guess you two youngsters are entitled to see the finish," he said. "Climb up behind there somewhere."

Two troopers took them up behind, and the little column trotted forward.

As they moved forward, still following the highroad that overlooked the valley, they realized that the whole country-side was alive with troops, all moving toward a common center—the crawling gray mass down there in the valley, of which they could catch oc-

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casional glimpses through folds in the hills or between patches of timber. Here dust-clouds marked the passage of horse or guns, there moving masses of brown told of plodding columns of infantry. From distant hill-tops heliographs flashed their messages up into the air, and tiny flags on other hills were being wagged about by the tireless men of the Signal Corps.

Presently the little force began to pass larger bodies of men, and Tom had a sudden realization of the great variety of troops that now composed the American Army of the North. There were regulars from a dozen different regiments, and he saw in the same column men from Michigan, Nevada, Ohio, and New Jersey.

The road they were following took a sudden sharp turn to the left, ducked for an instant into a hollow, then climbed a steep grade. The men passed the ammunition-wagons and caissons of several massed batteries grouped on the hill above them.

"They're right down the other side," Tom heard an artilleryman say. "You could 'most toss a stone onto 'em."

The officers dismounted and went forward

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on foot. The troopers remained in their saddles in the hollow back of the hill. Tom and Jack looked at each other in uncertainty, but the gray-haired officer with their friend the lieutenant decided the puzzling question by beckoning to them.

"You two stick right by me," he ordered. "There won't be much danger on the firing-line to-day, I guess."

They passed the guns, placed in battery just back of the crest of the hill, and came to the top, where they could look down into the valley.

Straight below them, not more than half a mile away, and looking, as the gunner had said, close enough so that a stone could be dropped on them, were the remnants of the lost army, the last uncaptured force of Blue soldiers on the continent.

They were stretched out in a long semi-circle, with lines of supports at each wing, the gray overcoats cleanly marked against the brown earth. There had been no time for the construction of intrenchments; the Blues had been forced to take what cover they could find. Here a few of them were lying behind a pile of stones which some farmer had

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raised in the corner of a field. Others had seized the slender shelter of rail fences, and still more were using the shallow ditches on each side of the road.

There was little movement. The dull sunlight glinted now and then on a gun-barrel or a helmet. Then Tom noticed something. There was no more mixing of uniforms among the lost army. The three commands had separated, and the units gathered in their proper places. On the right were the Hussars, on the left the light infantry, and in the center the dreaded "Leather Helmets." The boys caught some inkling of the reason for these. The Blues were proud of their regiments, regiments whose history stretched back more than a hundred years. They would fight their last fight in good order, each man of the twelve hundred in his proper place.

One glance at the surrounding hills was enough. Long yellow lines against the brown hills marked the intrenchments, and through the gaps between the ridges showed the packed masses of reserves. There were at least seven or eight thousand of the Americans in position, batteries were lying behind every crest, and more troops were coming up every

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moment. A human cordon was being drawn relentlessly about the lost army.

It was not like the other battles Tom and Jack had witnessed; it was more like pictures they had seen in histories, for, although both armies were in position, not a gun was fired. Tom could see the guns of the battery behind them, the breech-locks open, the men grouped about the tail-piece of the gun or the open door of the caisson, waiting for the word. Yet the word did not come. Minute dragged after minute, the numbers of the surrounding forces increased, dust-clouds hovered over every distant hilltop, and the slender line of the lost army stood unbending and silent on the plain below.

"Get back and a little to one side," a voice spoke in Tom's ear. "The air-blast from gun-fire isn't good for kids."

The two boys scampered out of the way, and almost at once the guns of the battery opened fire. At almost the same moment the whole encircling line of hills were crested with a grayish vapor, and the very air rocked with the clangor of at least a hundred guns.

Tom expected to see the lines of the Blues wiped out of existence in a few seconds, but

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he saw that all the shells were striking wide of the little army below them, and he realized that the American batteries were firing, not at their foe, but over and short of them! They were trying to drive them into surrender by a mere show of force.

But the Blues would not have it. They were powerless, but they would fight as long as they could pull a trigger. Through the bellowing of the artillery sounded the clean-cut, machine-like volleys of the Blue rifles.

The artillery fell silent. A group of American cavalry, the leader carrying a white flag, moved down into the plain. A little cluster of "Leather Helmets" moved out to meet them. There was an instant's parley, then the two groups separated and moved back. A minute later the crashing volleys from the lost army broke out again.

Even then there was a short pause before the actual work of destruction commenced. The two boys stood close enough to the group of officers near the battery to hear what they were saying. The gray-haired officer who had invited them to accompany him was speaking to the men about him.

"Gentlemen," he said, slowly, "we have

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a hard task before us. We are going to do more than wipe out a force of brave men. We are likely to deal the death-blow to the last army of invasion the world will see. This has been a great war and a futile one. It has proved that trained fighting-men cannot conquer a great nation. It has proved that war is more than terrible, more than expensive; it is useless.

"Those men down there stand for something that is already gone. They belong to some of the most famous fighting regiments in the world. Yesterday their names struck terror. To-morrow they will be a memory. The Greek phalanx, the Roman legion, Napoleon's Old Guard, the English 'thin red line of heroes,' and now the lost army of the Blues! They are the last of a long chain, perhaps the greatest—and this is their last day!"

A passing subaltern noticed the two boys and offered them a pair of glasses. Tom focused them, and almost jumped as the powerful lenses seemed to bring the distant Blues within a few feet of him.

He could see details distinctly. The men had ceased firing and had their rifles slung

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over the shoulders. Many were shaking hands with their officers or with one another. Others squatted on the ground, scribbling on bits of paper, or pinning these scraps to their overcoats. Some stood with folded arms, staring at the cordon of hills, waiting. Tom could even see the details of the uniforms under the big gray overcoats, and the broad, good-natured, bearded faces of the men.

While he watched, a single figure walked out in front of the long line and unfurled a big flag that had been sheathed in an oil-cloth cover. Its folds floated out in the light breeze and fluttered above the standard-bearer's head. Instantly every one of the Blues was on his feet, his hat or helmet off, cheering like mad.

Tom held the glass out quickly to his companion.

"You look, Jack," he said. "I've seen enough."

Then came the finish, unexpected, startling. A bugle-call sounded from the plain. The Blue line broke, shifted, reformed. In three tight-packed masses, light infantry, Hussars, "Leather Helmets," the twelve hundred invaders moved out toward their

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foes as though on parade. From the great host of Americans sounded a cheer that rose above the rattle of rifles. The men seemed to know that they were watching the last charge.

So great was the volume of fire that there was nothing terrible about the end. It was as though the lost army had suddenly become very tired and stopped to rest.

Instead of an outburst of wild cheering, the victors were strangely silent, staring down at the field below them.

"It's over!" Tom said, slowly, to himself. "It's over—the war's over. The last Blue is gone!"

CHAPTER XXXIII

IT was night when they reached Bradley, sore and tired after a ten-mile ride on the bouncing caisson of a gun. Fortunately, the train on which they were supposed to arrive had been delayed, and their mothers had not had a great while in which to worry.

There was a happy reunion in Grandfather Blakesley's big parlor, and the four people boarded a train for the city that same night.

So many things had to be talked over, so many experiences related, that the train was well inside the limits of Pittsfield before the boys had a chance for a word together.

Then, as they were collecting the bags and suit-cases in the aisle of the car, Jack said, suddenly: "Funny, isn't it, to think there won't be any more fighting?"

Tom nodded. "Just for a minute this afternoon I was sort of sorry," he confessed. "But I'm glad enough now. I guess everybody's glad."

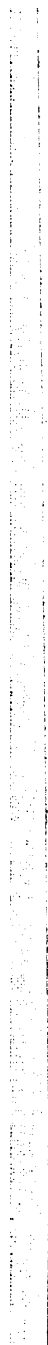
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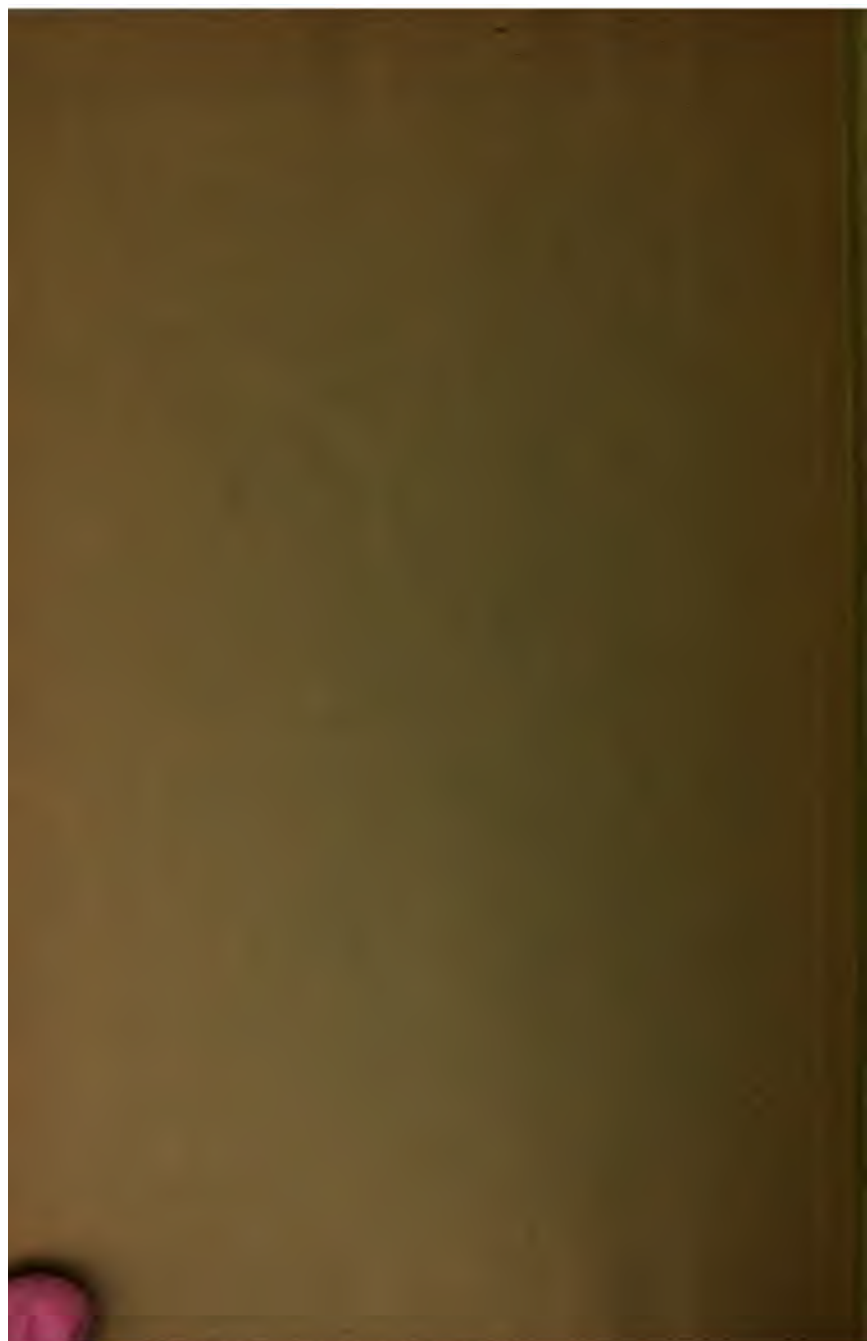
As they were walking through the big station, crowded with returning people, Jack spoke again: "And it's just as that soldier told you. Nobody 'll try to beat us again."

Tom drew a long breath. "If the Blues couldn't beat us," he said, with a thrill of pride, "it's a cinch nobody can—and I guess they won't try."

THE END

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